

Semantic under specification in context-dependent expressions in EkeGusii

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2025, 27(03), 1140-1146

Publication history: Received on 02 August 2025; revised on 09 September 2025; accepted on 11 September 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2025.27.3.3126>

Abstract

This paper investigates semantic under specification in the EkeGusii language, a Bantu language spoken in southwestern Kenya. The focus is on context-dependent expressions particularly quantifiers, pronouns, and adjectives that exhibit indeterminacy in meaning until resolved through discourse. The analysis is framed within Dynamic Semantics and Contextualism, both of which provide robust tools for understanding how such expressions interact with context to yield interpretation. Using elicited examples and natural discourse data, the study reveals that EkeGusii extensively relies on contextual cues such as noun class agreement, discourse prominence, and sociocultural frames to resolve underspecified meanings. Findings demonstrate that under specification in EkeGusii is not an anomaly but a functional design of the language that enables flexible and efficient communication, consistent with broader patterns in Bantu semantics.

Keywords: Semantic Under specification; Context-Dependence Ekegusii Language; Contextual Meaning Resolution; Ambiguity in Language Use

1. Introduction

The study of meaning in natural language has evolved from focusing on static, truth-conditional semantics to more dynamic models that accommodate the interplay between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. A central concern in contemporary linguistic theory is how semantic under specification expressions that are incomplete in meaning without context affects comprehension, interpretation, and communication across languages. This phenomenon is increasingly recognized not as a deficiency but as a structural feature of natural language that facilitates flexibility and economy in communication (Bach, 2012; Qing, 2020).

Globally, the concept of semantic under specification has gained prominence in formal and cognitive semantics. Marten (1999), in his analysis of underspecification within the verb phrase, emphasizes that verb phrases often lack fixed argument structures and require contextual enrichment to resolve interpretation. Similarly, Qing (2020) investigates underspecification in the domain of degrees, particularly gradable adjectives like *tall* or *expensive*, which do not encode fixed standards of comparison but draw from discourse and speaker intention. Such works underscore the inadequacy of rigid semantic models and advocate for approaches such as Dynamic Semantics, where meaning is constructed incrementally in discourse, and Contextualism, which treats contextual factors as constitutive of meaning.

Other global scholarship also bridges semantics with lexical pragmatics. Lu (2016) explores the semantic-pragmatic interface in polysemous constructions, arguing for models that integrate lexical ambiguity, pragmatic inference, and contextually driven meaning resolution. Bach (2012) further elaborates the philosophical underpinnings of context dependence, drawing attention to expressions whose interpretation shifts depending on speaker intention, presupposition, and discourse coherence. Together, these global perspectives articulate a vision of language where underspecification is a resource, not a problem, reflecting the cognitive and social dynamism of linguistic interaction.

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Regionally, the study of African languages is increasingly contributing to these debates by showcasing how agglutinative morphology, rich agreement systems, and context-based discourse practices mediate underspecified meanings. Keet (2017), for instance, explores semantic alignment in isiZulu, comparing part-whole relations with English to reveal how Bantu morphosemantics contributes to meaning structuring. These comparative insights highlight the unique ways in which Bantu languages encode meaning underspecification through class agreement, ellipsis, and anaphoric reference.

In the East African context, researchers have begun to delve into language-specific manifestations of semantic and pragmatic interplay. Msuya (2019), in a study on Tanzanian newspaper headlines, identifies pragmatic strategies ellipsis, ambiguity, and metonymy that create underspecified expressions requiring contextual decoding. Similarly, Mwendwa (2020), analyzing metaphorical expressions in Kikamba gospel songs, adopts a lexical pragmatic approach to show how metaphor, often inherently underspecified, is interpreted through cultural schemas and shared religious knowledge.

In Kenya, scholarship has intensified around indigenous Bantu languages. Munyaya (2017) provides a detailed semantic analysis of Kigiriyama, emphasizing how lexical pragmatic processes such as narrowing, broadening, and metaphor shape meaning beyond what is overtly expressed. Kipsang (2019) investigates the interface between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in Nandi, identifying structures where interpretation is not solely derivable from form but from discourse structure and cultural knowledge. These studies echo the findings of global theorists while grounding them in the semantic and pragmatic textures of local languages.

Despite this growing body of work, EkeGusii, a major Bantu language of southwestern Kenya, remains under-researched in terms of its contribution to theories of semantic underspecification. Given its rich noun class system, pro-drop features, and discourse-sensitive reference mechanisms, EkeGusii presents an ideal linguistic context in which to investigate how quantifiers, pronouns, and adjectives acquire full meaning only in context. As in other Bantu languages, EkeGusii speakers routinely interpret underspecified expressions by drawing on grammatical agreement, discourse structure, and culturally shared knowledge—a process best captured by Dynamic Semantics and Contextualism.

This study therefore positions itself within this growing tradition of integrating theoretical linguistics with African language data. By exploring semantic underspecification in EkeGusii, the research contributes not only to the documentation and analysis of the language itself but also to the refinement of global semantic and pragmatic theories through an African linguistic lens.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Despite growing interest in semantic underspecification, most existing research focuses on Indo-European languages, leaving a gap in the study of African languages like EkeGusii. In EkeGusii, expressions such as pronouns, quantifiers, and adjectives often lack fully specified meanings and rely heavily on contextual cues for interpretation. However, little is known about how EkeGusii speakers resolve these meanings in real discourse using morphosyntactic and pragmatic strategies. This study addresses the lack of empirical research on underspecification in EkeGusii and explores how meaning is dynamically constructed through context.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Dynamic Semantics and Contextualism as complementary theoretical approaches to explain how underspecified expressions in EkeGusii such as pronouns, quantifiers, and adjectives derive their full meanings from context. While Dynamic Semantics offers a formal account of how meaning unfolds in discourse, it does not fully capture the sociocultural and pragmatic dimensions that are essential in a context-rich language like EkeGusii. Contextualism is therefore introduced to address these limitations.

1.3. Dynamic Semantics

Dynamic Semantics (Heim, 1982; Kamp and Reyle, 1993) treats meaning as a context-change potential, focusing on how utterances update information states within a discourse. This theory excels at explaining how referential expressions such as pronouns (*a-* 'he/she') and quantifiers (*biosi* 'all') function as variables that depend on prior discourse for resolution. For instance, in EkeGusii, a subject prefix like *a-* refers back to a previously mentioned noun, and a quantifier like *abana bonsi* ('all the children') is interpreted relative to a discourse-introduced set.

However, while Dynamic Semantics formalizes the mechanics of referent tracking and discourse updates, it does not adequately account for how extra-linguistic factors such as speaker intent, physical environment, cultural knowledge, and implicit comparison classes contribute to meaning resolution. For example, adjectives like *ekenene* ('big' in

reference to a thing) or deixis in *eke* ('this one') remain vague unless grounded in shared sociocultural or physical context, which Dynamic Semantics alone cannot specify.

To bridge this gap, the study turns to Contextualism, a theory which emphasizes that meaning is not just built through syntactic and discourse structure, but is deeply shaped by context (Stalnaker, 1978; Recanati, 2004). Contextualism provides the tools to analyze how EkeGusii speakers rely on speaker intentions, cultural norms, discourse history, and physical surroundings to resolve underspecification. For example, the interpretation of *nekiya* ('it is good') may vary based on what *it* refers to an action, a person, or an event all of which require inferential enrichment beyond formal semantic mechanisms.

Thus, while Dynamic Semantics explains how referential dependencies are tracked and updated through discourse, Contextualism is necessary to capture the interpretive processes grounded in EkeGusii's socio-pragmatic realities. The combination of both theories allows for a more comprehensive account of how underspecified expressions achieve meaning in a dynamic, culturally embedded linguistic context.

2. Literature review

The phenomenon of semantic underspecification where certain linguistic expressions are incomplete in meaning unless enriched by context has been the subject of growing interest in both formal and applied linguistics. This section reviews relevant global, regional, and local literature, identifying both theoretical contributions and empirical gaps that inform the present study on EkeGusii.

Marten (1999) investigates syntactic and semantic underspecification in the verb phrase, primarily within formal linguistic models. He argues that underspecification is not an aberration but a structural aspect of language that allows for flexibility in verb-argument realization. While this work lays important theoretical groundwork, it is Eurocentric and abstract, lacking engagement with Bantu languages or pragmatically conditioned meaning shifts in discourse.

Recanati (1986) introduces a pragmatic theory of contextual dependence in definite descriptions, arguing that meaning arises through both semantic structure and inferential processes. His work is foundational for Contextualism, offering a philosophical underpinning to how speakers resolve referential ambiguity. However, its application remains largely restricted to English and lacks empirical testing in oral discourse or morphologically rich languages like EkeGusii.

Qing (2020) examines semantic underspecification in the domain of degrees, especially adjectives like "tall or expensive", which require contextual comparison standards. Qing's findings are crucial to this study's treatment of gradable adjectives in EkeGusii (*ekenene*, 'big'), but the analysis is based entirely on English data and does not address typologically diverse languages.

Novel et al. (2020) provide an interdisciplinary review of context-dependent expressions such as *nearness* in spatial cognition and computational models. While they highlight how meaning depends on contextual frames, their focus is largely on computational representation and measurement, making the findings conceptually useful but not directly applicable to the discourse-pragmatic context of Bantu languages.

Wu (2011) and Li et al. (2020) also contribute to the understanding of underspecification from computational and syntactic-semantic interfaces. Wu analyzes Chinese copular constructions, highlighting how context drives enrichment of semantically vague expressions. Li et al., on the other hand, survey advances in context-dependent semantic parsing, which are relevant to processing, but not to naturalistic language use in oral discourse. Both works support the idea that semantic content often underdetermines interpretation, but they do not explore the cultural or pragmatic factors relevant in African linguistic contexts.

Monawar and Strey (2017) explore modal underspecification, noting that context and pragmatic reasoning often determine the force or scope of modal verbs. Although their analysis is based on Arabic and European languages, their attention to speaker intent and relevance theory provides useful parallels to context-dependent expressions in EkeGusii, particularly in social or evaluative utterances.

Marten and Kula (2014) focus on applicatives in Bemba, a Bantu language. Their study shows how morphosyntactic devices interact with semantic roles, leaving some arguments pragmatically inferred or underspecified. While they do not focus explicitly on semantic underspecification, their analysis demonstrates how Bantu morphosyntax often encodes implicit information, reinforcing the need for context-aware interpretation.

Cable (2013) investigates graded tense in Gĩkũyũ, arguing that tense markers encode degrees rather than discrete categories. This contribution supports Qing's (2020) findings within a Bantu context and shows how temporality itself can be semantically underspecified. However, Cable's work is limited to tense systems and does not consider pronominal reference or quantification.

Muhando (2022) offers a sociolinguistic analysis of Sheng, the urban Nairobi language, exploring how grammatical and lexical innovation reflects identity. Although not directly on underspecification, this study underscores the importance of sociocultural context in shaping interpretation, an insight crucial for interpreting deictic and evaluative expressions in EkeGusii.

Kipsang (2019) presents a syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic interface study in Nandi, a Nilotic language spoken in Kenya. He identifies how meaning is often shaped through context, especially in reference tracking and ellipsis. While his study is highly relevant methodologically, Nandi's typological features differ from those of Bantu languages like EkeGusii, which rely more heavily on noun class systems and agreement morphology.

Nandiemo (2024) explores conversational implicature in dowry negotiations among the Maragoli, providing a discourse-pragmatic account of meaning inference in culturally specific contexts. This study is relevant for its focus on cultural scripts and inferential communication, similar to how EkeGusii speakers may resolve vague or socially embedded expressions. However, it does not deal with morphosyntactic underspecification or gradable expressions.

While each of these local studies enriches our understanding of language use in Kenya, none provides a comprehensive analysis of semantic underspecification in EkeGusii, particularly across multiple domains such as quantification, reference, and gradability. Furthermore, the theoretical frameworks used often remain limited to formal syntax or general pragmatics, without integrating Dynamic Semantics and Contextualism to model meaning resolution in discourse.

While global studies establish the theoretical foundation of semantic underspecification, they overlook how such processes function in languages with complex morphological and discourse systems like EkeGusii. Regional and local studies, although insightful, are often language-specific and fail to generalize findings to the broader Bantu semantic architecture. Moreover, no known study has systematically applied Dynamic Semantics and Contextualism to EkeGusii, despite the language's rich features such as pro-drop structures, noun class agreement, and culturally embedded deixis.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore how context-dependent expressions such as pronouns, quantifiers, and adjectives in EkeGusii acquire meaning through discourse. A qualitative framework was suitable for capturing the interpretive processes that speakers engage in when resolving underspecified expressions within real communicative contexts. The theoretical orientation was grounded in Dynamic Semantics and Contextualism, which guided the interpretation of how meaning is constructed dynamically and contextually in the language.

The research was conducted among native speakers of EkeGusii in Kisii and Nyamira counties, where the language is actively used in both formal and informal settings. EkeGusii's morphosyntactic richness, particularly its noun class system, pro-drop tendencies, and reliance on shared cultural knowledge, provided an ideal linguistic environment for the study of semantic underspecification.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The study targeted individuals who were not only fluent speakers of EkeGusii but also routinely engaged in contexts where linguistic meaning is negotiated, such as in storytelling, traditional ceremonies, religious discourse, and community meetings. These included elders, teachers, local leaders, and cultural practitioners. In addition, snowball sampling was employed to expand the participant pool. Initial participants referred the researcher to other speakers who were known for their linguistic fluency and cultural insight, allowing for access to participants who might not have been identified through formal selection methods.

Data collection involved a combination of naturalistic observation, audio recording of everyday interactions, and semi-structured interviews. Informal conversations, folktale performances, and communal discussions were recorded with consent. These natural discourse settings provided authentic examples of how underspecified expressions are used and interpreted in real time. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a more focused elicitation of context-dependent expressions. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the meanings of expressions such as "all," "he/she," "good," and "big," and to explain how such meanings change based on situation or speaker intent. Elicitation tasks were also used, where speakers responded to culturally familiar scenarios to illustrate how meaning shifts depending on context.

The data were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively. Attention was paid to how meaning was resolved in discourse, with focus on referent tracking, deixis, gradability, and the interaction of lexical items with the surrounding context. Underspecified expressions were coded according to their morphosyntactic form and the contextual cues used for their interpretation. The analysis was interpretive, drawing on the principles of Dynamic Semantics to understand how meaning evolves across discourse, and Contextualism to assess how speaker intention, cultural frames, and discourse history shape interpretation.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was ensured in the recording and presentation of data. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage, and cultural protocols were respected, particularly when working with elders and community knowledge bearers.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that semantic underspecification is a pervasive and functional feature of EkeGusii discourse. Rather than indicating a deficiency in the language system, underspecified expressions such as pronouns, quantifiers, and adjectives reflect a deeper reliance on context, discourse history, and shared cultural knowledge to resolve meaning. This supports the broader theoretical claim advanced in Dynamic Semantics that meaning unfolds incrementally and is constantly shaped by the evolving discourse context. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that Dynamic Semantics alone cannot account for the full range of interpretive strategies used by EkeGusii speakers, thereby validating the role of Contextualism in explaining context-sensitive interpretation.

Pronouns in EkeGusii, particularly subject markers such as *a-* (he/she), are highly dependent on discourse salience and noun class agreement. In most observed narratives and conversations, speakers omitted overt noun phrases, relying instead on agreement morphology and prior mention to maintain reference continuity. The Dynamic Semantics framework explains how such pronouns act as discourse variables whose values are retrieved from the common ground established in previous utterances. However, in cases where multiple potential antecedents existed especially when they belonged to the same noun class speakers and hearers depended on pragmatic cues, including physical gestures, topicality, and speaker intent, to resolve ambiguity. This interpretive process aligns closely with the principles of Contextualism, highlighting the essential role of inferential reasoning beyond grammatical cues.

Quantifiers such as *bionsi* ('all') and *ebinge* ('many') also exhibited semantic underspecification. These expressions did not specify the domains they quantified over unless such domains had already been activated in the discourse. For instance, in a conversation about schoolchildren, *abana bionsi ma-gendete* ('all the children went') was understood only because the referent group had been introduced earlier. Dynamic Semantics adequately models this through its capacity to update and track discourse referents, but the interpretation was also shaped by cultural expectations and shared presuppositions for example, which group of children one would typically talk about in a given setting. Thus, the quantifier's meaning was partly constructed through extralinguistic assumptions, again affirming the explanatory value of Contextualism.

Gradable adjectives such as *ekenene* ('big'), *ekebe* ('bad'), and *buya* ('good') were among the most context-sensitive expressions observed. These adjectives were consistently interpreted relative to contextually determined standards what counts as *obonene* (in terms of age) for a child, for instance, differed from what it meant for an adult, object, or action. Can also be used to refer to Gods greatness. In many cases, speakers used such adjectives with no overt comparison class, relying on the listener's knowledge of the subject or event to infer the standard. These findings reinforce Qing's (2020) argument that degree expressions are inherently underspecified and context-dependent. The use of such adjectives in EkeGusii exemplifies how context does not merely supplement meaning but is often constitutive of it a key claim in Contextualist theory.

Additionally, deixis and anaphoric constructions such as *eke* ('this one') and *keria* ('that one') showed context-dependent interpretation that extended beyond discourse cues to include physical proximity, speaker perspective, and shared cultural scripts. For example, when referring to a sick person or a respected elder, speakers used these expressions with implicit social knowledge, such as familiarity, status, or relational distance. Such interpretive mechanisms are not captured by Dynamic Semantics alone, which does not model non-linguistic situational factors. Contextualism, on the other hand, provides the theoretical space to analyze how meaning is inferred through socio-pragmatic reasoning and world knowledge.

Overall, the study demonstrates that while Dynamic Semantics offers a powerful model for understanding the role of discourse in reference resolution and quantifier scope, it does not fully address how cultural, physical, and social

contexts inform interpretation in EkeGusii. The incorporation of Contextualism enables a more comprehensive account by emphasizing the situated, inferential, and socially grounded nature of meaning-making. Together, these frameworks reveal that semantic underspecification in EkeGusii is not only grammatically licensed but also communicatively efficient allowing speakers to rely on shared knowledge, discourse structure, and cultural norms to convey meaning with minimal linguistic material.

These findings also contribute to broader typological discussions on African languages, especially Bantu languages, which are often characterized by rich morphosyntactic systems and context-sensitive reference strategies. The EkeGusii data align with previous research in related languages, such as Nandi, Gĩkũyũ, and Kigiryama, but extend the analysis by systematically applying semantic theory to account for dynamic meaning resolution in real-time interaction. The study thus not only enriches the documentation of EkeGusii but also enhances the theoretical understanding of how meaning emerges in natural language use.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how context-dependent expressions in EkeGusii—such as pronouns, quantifiers, and adjectives are semantically underspecified in isolation but resolved through context during communication. Drawing on the frameworks Dynamic Semantics of and Contextualism, the analysis demonstrated that meaning in EkeGusii is not statically encoded in linguistic forms but emerges dynamically through interaction, discourse structure, and shared cultural knowledge.

The findings confirm that Dynamic Semantics is particularly effective in explaining how referents are tracked and updated across discourse, especially in the use of pronouns and quantifiers. However, the limitations of this model became evident in cases where meaning was shaped by physical context, speaker intention, or cultural presuppositions domains where Contextualism proved crucial. Adjectives like *ekenene* ('big' in reference to a thing) and deictic expressions such as *eke* ('this one') exemplified how interpretation depends on extra-linguistic information that extends beyond what is represented in formal discourse models.

By integrating both theories, the study provided a nuanced account of how EkeGusii speakers negotiate meaning in real-time communication. It revealed that semantic underspecification is not a linguistic deficit but a communicative strategy that draws on the speaker's ability to rely on shared assumptions and cultural familiarity. This has significant implications for semantic theory, particularly in showing the limits of decontextualized approaches and the need to account for language use in diverse linguistic ecologies.

Moreover, the study contributes to the under-documented semantics of EkeGusii and adds to broader linguistic discussions on meaning resolution in Bantu languages. It highlights the importance of culturally embedded, pragmatically informed approaches to meaning and calls for further research into the interplay of grammar, discourse, and social cognition in African languages.

Recommendations

5.1. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed

Integrate context-based meaning analysis into language teaching and documentation efforts: Given that EkeGusii relies heavily on context for meaning interpretation, educators, curriculum developers, and language documentarians should include discourse-based and pragmatically oriented materials that reflect how meaning is constructed beyond isolated words and phrases.

5.2. Support community-based language revitalization through culturally contextual materials

Since many underspecified expressions in EkeGusii draw from shared sociocultural knowledge, language preservation initiatives should document proverbs, narratives, and idiomatic expressions that naturally exhibit this feature, reinforcing intergenerational language transmission.

5.3. Enhance the training of linguists and field researchers in dynamic and contextual models of meaning

Formal approaches often underrepresent how African languages handle underspecification. Researchers working on Bantu languages should be equipped with theoretical tools that foreground context-sensitive interpretation, such as Dynamic Semantics and Contextualism.

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