LEXICAL SEMANTICS OF *CUT*: A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study focuses on the semantics of the word cut in order to ascertain whether it has predominantly negative or positive meaning. For a more concrete and systematic study, an analysis of the verb cut in Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus and The Things Around Your Neck were carried out using a corpus analysis software AntConc to extract the data, with the aim of looking at the meanings cut denote in extended unit of meaning. The analysis of the lexical item cut is based on Sinclair's (1996, 1998) four categories of co-selection of lexical item namely: collocation, colligation, semantic prosody and semantic preference. The concordant results for the verb reveal that the lexical item cut collocates frequently with adverbs and nouns such as hair, meat, rope, short etc. The colligational pattern is mostly common with pronouns (possessive and neuter), prepositions and determiners. The semantic prosody of the lexical item depicts negativity in most occurrences. In spite of the strong negative semantic prosody (SP) of the lexical item cut, there are also environments where the verb has a positive semantic prosody such as in13 occurrences, and neutrality in 3 occurrences. Finally, the semantic preference of the verb cut denotes largeness, growth, length, size etc.

1.0 Introduction

Lexical semantics is an academic discipline concerned with the meaning of words. Lexical semanticists are interested in what words mean, why they mean what they mean, how they are represented in speaker's minds and how they are used in text and discourse

Several theories of lexical semantics look at meaning from different perspectives, they include: structuralism, cognitive semantics, and formal semantics. These theories are not so much rival approaches, but are to a certain extent complimentary. Structuralism focuses on meaning relation both at the paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels. The cognitive approach focuses on the relation between meaning conceptualization and denotation. The formal approach focuses on the relation between expression and denotation (Lobner, 2002).

When we have a word, either in written or spoken form, we begin to imagine what it means, how it is represented in a speaker's mind and how it is used in text and discourse. Words change

their meanings when they co-occur with other word than in isolation. This study is therefore geared towards exploring the semantics of the word *cut* with the aim of looking at the meanings *cut* denotes in extended unit of meaning. The novels used to obtain the data were: *The Things Around Your Neck* and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. A total number of 93 chapters constitute our data except chapters 1, 2, 17, 18, 19, 50 and 51. which were absent in the soft copy of the novel *Purple Hibiscus*. For a more concrete and systematic study and analysis of the verb *cut*, the *AntConc* software was used to extract the data for the study and Sinclair's (1996, 1998) model of four categories of co-selection of lexical items; collocation, colligation, semantic preference and semantic prosody form the basis for data analysis.

This study is undertaken in a bid to ascertain the semantics of the word *cut*. It focuses on whether the lexical item has predominantly negative or positive meaning. However, it is hoped that the study will improve the awareness of word meaning and their usages in various contexts, which will no doubt be of help to translators, lexicographers, students of linguistics and linguistics scholars.

2.0 Literature Review

This section consists of theoretical studies, empirical review and theoretical framework adopted for the analysis.

2.1 Theoretical Studies

2.1.1 The Concept of Lexical Semantics

According to Pustejovsky (1996), Lexical Semantics studies what words mean and how their meanings contribute to the compositional interpretation of natural language utterances. Within Linguistics, Lexical Semantics critically overlaps with what is traditionally referred to as Lexicology which is the overall study of the vocabularies of languages, encompassing topics such as morphology, etymology, social, regional and dialectal aspects of the vocabulary (Hanks 2007; Geeraerts 2010).

Lexical semantics in a nutshell, deals with the meaning of words or what the words of a language denote. The relationship between a word and the concept it denotes can be one word denoting one concept, one word denoting two concepts, one word denoting several concepts and several words denoting one concept. The next section provides the various approaches to lexical semantics showing this relationship.

2.1.2 Theories of Lexical Semantics

According to Lobner (2002), there are three theories applicable to Lexical Semantics. They are: Structuralist approach, Cognitive Semantic approach and the Formal Semantic approach.

Lobner (2002) asserts that the structuralist approach to meaning is radical. This implies that we cannot determine the meaning of a lexeme independently, but only its relations to the meanings of other lexemes. For instance, the relation between meaning and lexeme are said to be either syntagmatic or paradigmatic. A distinction is made between paradigmatic relations and syntagmatic relations. For the syntagmatic relation, Lobner (2002) opines that all linguistic units–sounds, syllables, words, phrases, sentences can be combined into more complete units referred to as a syntagm (from ancient Greek *syntagma*). According to Cruse (1986) Syntagmatic relations are linear relation formed between words in a sentence. According to the syntagmatic approach, the meaning of a word is defined in terms of the company it keeps in language use, or in terms of the totality of its uses. Firth (1957) and Sinclair (1987) are of the view that the idea of syntagmatic approach to meaning is with its interest in strings of words, their collocation and their co-occurrence patterns. With regard to paradigmatic relations, Lobner (2002) posits that they are relations between the elements of a paradigm (set of all elements that can fill a certain position in a syntagm).

The Structuralist approach to the study of meaning has been adopted and applied to Lexical items by different scholars. One notable scholar that adopts this approach is Sinclair (1991). He identifies four categories of co-selection which make up the lexical items, namely: Obligatory Semantic Prosody, Collocation, Semantic Preference, and Colligation.

Semantic Prosody describes how core words can be construed with particular words (collocates) that have other meanings. It should be noted that there is often no word in a language that can be used as descriptive label when it comes to Semantic Prosody of an item.

Collocation on the other hand, according to Sinclair (1991), is the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text. Sinclair calls it lexical choices. Collocation is a guide to meaning, when a noun is ambiguous to meaning (as many are), collocation can indicate which meaning is relevant.

Colligation is the relation between a pair of grammatical categories or, in a slightly wider sense, a pairing of lexis and grammar and semantic preference is the relation not between individual words,

but between a lemma or word-form and a set of semantically related words, and often, it is not difficult to find a semantic label for the set.

From the cognitive approach, lexical semantics postulates that language is part of a more general human cognitive ability and can therefore only describe the word as it is organized within people's conceptual spaces. It is implicit that there are some differences between these conceptual spaces and the real world. Cognitive semantic theories are typically built on the argument that lexical meaning is conceptual. That is, meaning is not necessarily reference to the entity or relation in some real or possible world. Instead, meaning corresponds with a concept held in the mind based on personal understanding. On the contrary, according to Lobner (2002), formal semantic approach tries to capture meaning indirectly by studying reference and truth conditions. Following from the various approaches, the relationship between a word and what it denotes has been described from various perspectives. The next section looks at some studies on lexical meanings showing their negative and/or positive potentials.

2.2 Empirical Review

This section reviews works that have been carried out by different scholars.

Stewart (2010) investigates the lexical item *Break out*. He observes that the semantic preference of the word denotes: situation of conflict, disease and broadly problematic circumstances. Words immediately it include: war, conflict, inflection, crisis. The semantic prosody is unfavourable or 'aura of meaning'.

Sinclair's (2003:21) example of *regime* shows that the word has significant collocations with political systems and dictators with extremely unpopular reputations in the western world. Hence, the most frequent collocates of *regime* includes: *communist, military, Nazi, Soviet, strict, repressive, totalitarian, authoritarian, power etc.* He notes that almost all occurrences of *regime* bring out a bad prosody. Furthermore, with regard to colligation, Sinclair (2003:76-79) uses the example of posture meaning and co-text of *lap* to show that it has a remarkable selection of a possessive pronoun/adjective in front of *lap* featuring *her* and five modifying noun groups ending in'*s*: such as *her, his father's, her daughter's, the lap of her skirts, your* etc. which are clearly part of the creation of its meaning. Hence, the "posture" meaning is created by a phrase which consists minimally of a preposition, usually *on*, a possessive usually an adjective and the word *lap* in that order i.e. PREP +

POSSESSIVE + LAP patterns of co-text. Sinclair (2003) investigates the semantic prosody of the phrase "Best thing". He ran a concordance based around the collocation "best thing" he drew subtle distinctions in his analysis of the semantic prosody of "best thing". Sinclair (2003) aligning his view with Bonelli (1992) states that when (the) best thing has a backward referent, it is unrestricted in meaning and means "the best possible event". On the contrary, when it has a forward referent that occurs just after some unfortunate event it has been described, it means the least damaging action in the circumstance. This is called "damage limitation". Simply put, the two meanings are substantially different; one is a very desirable event, while the other is an action which is seen as the least unpleasant of a set of alternatives. However, the phrase can be deployed in two different ways to make two different meanings, without the meanings of the words changing in a dramatic way.

Also, Stubbs (1995), shows how more than 90% of collocates of "cause" are negative, for example, *accident, cancer, commotion, crises and delay etc*. By way of a positive Semantic Prosody, his study of "provide" typically collocates with *care, food, help, jobs, relief, and support etc.*

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The research work is designed from a syntagmatic approach to meaning which states that the meaning of a word is defined in terms of the company it keeps in language use, or in terms of totality of its uses. One of the most widely cited models providing insight to lexico-grammatical profile of words is that of Sinclair. The Sinclarian (1996, 1998) framework of semantic prosody is primarily central and lies absolutely within the model of lexical/ extended unit of meaning. Sinclair's four types of co-occurrence relations in extended lexico-semantic units include: collocation (lexical choices), colligation (grammatical choices), semantic preference (the association of formal patterning with a semantic field) and semantic prosody which has attitudinal and pragmatic functions; and also crucial to the unit because these pragmatic functions very often constitute the speaker's reason for making the utterance.

Sinclairian model assumes that meaning cannot be said to belong to a single word, but to phraseology as a whole. In other words, SP is not discernable from the words of a lexical item alone, but requires those words to be used by a particular set of participants to obtain a particular effect relative to particular objects. Hence, according to Sinclair (1996:34), the primary function of SP is that it expresses something close to the function of the item; it shows how the rest of the item is to be

interpreted functionally. However, in explaining the extended unit of meaning of SP, he further says that by choosing a word form which in itself does not carry negative connotations but has a negative semantic prosody, the extended unit of meaning becomes attitudinal. The next section adopts the four types of co-occurrence relations in extended lexico-semantic units in the analysis of the word *cut.*

3.0 Methodology

Data for this study were collected from the novels: *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Things Around Your Neck*, using the AntCon software to obtain the corpus evidence and the analysis of the data for this study is based on Sinclair's four components of extended unit of meanings which include collocation, colligation, semantic preference and semantic prosody. Using the concordance tool or key word in context (KWIC), a search for the verb "cut" in Chimamanda Adichie's novels: *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Things Around Your Neck* was carried out. A total number of 45 hits for the verb *cut* were identified out of the 151,867 word tokens. All the usages in the concordance lines were analyzed and interpreted. The choice of the verb *cut* was chosen because of its neutrality in ascertaining whether it is negative or positive in meaning when it is heard.

4.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

This section conveys a detailed analysis of the data used in this study. An analysis of the lexical item *cut* in Appendix was carried out in accordance with Sinclair's four categories of co-selection.

A. Collocation (lexical choices)

Below are collocates of the lexical item "cut".

Table 1: Collocates and their grammatical labels.

Lines	Collocate	Grammatical label
5	Across	Adverb
025, 26	Meat	Noun
6, 7, 18, 36	Short	Adverb
9, 21	Up	Adverb
15, 16	Rope	Noun
11	Off	Adverb
19	In pieces	Adjective
35	Down	Adverb
44	Out	Adverb
28, 29, 30, 31	Hair	Noun

Cut is a verb that frequently collocates with an adverb in the data indicating location/position. *Cut* collocates frequently with *short, hair, up* etc.

B. Colligation (grammatical choices)

This simply refers to the grammatical words that co-occur with the lexical item *cut*. The data reveals that *cut* colligates with mostly pronouns (possessive and neuter), prepositions and determiners. This is illustrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Colligates and their grammatical labels:

Lines	Colligates	Grammatical label
2,28,30,31	Your	Pronoun
4,13,20	Them	Pronoun
10,12	To	Preposition
15,16,23,24,25,26	The	Determiner
17	Into	Preposition
18,36	Him	Pronoun
19,22,38	In	Preposition
29	My	Pronoun
32	It	Pronoun
23,39	His	Pronoun
34	On	Preposition

Extracts from the concordance lines are illustrated in (1-4) showing the colligational patterns such as pronoun, preposition and determiner.

1) "Careful, mama, or those pieces will cut **your** fingers"… (line 2, pronoun).

2)…why did you cut **it**… (line 32, pronoun)

3)…cleans the cut **on** Chika's leg… (line 34 preposition)

4)…so he can cut **the** meat. (line 25, determiner)

The above colligational patterns showing the different grammatical choices are frequent in the data. It should be noted that colligates for the lexical item *cut* is to the right of the node.

(C) Semantic Prosody

The semantic prosody has to do with the connotative meaning of the core word (positive or negative) in relation to other words. In this study the lexical item *cut* mostly suggests negativity. This is evident in the data. However, there are also environments where other lexical items that co-occur with the core word give it a positive meaning. There are also some environments where the meaning of the lexical item *cut* are neutral, that is, it is neither positive nor negative. Table 3 below gives various instances where the lexical item *cut* depicts negativity, positivity and neutrality with the following number of occurrences 3 (neutral), 13 (positive), and 27 (negative) respectively (see appendix).

The collocate *short* has the highest number of occurrence (see: lines 6, 7, 12, 13, 18, 36) followed by *pieces* (lines 2, 17, 19, 27).

Table 3: Semantic prosody and their relations

Lines	Expression	Positive/Negative	Relationship
1	Not tanned	Positive	Complement
2	Pieces	Negative	Complement
3	Smooth and straight	Positive	Complement
4	Decorate	Positive	Adjective
5	Meticulously	Positive	Adjective
6	Short	Negative	Adjective
7	Short	Negative	Adjective
9	Up	Negative	Preposition
10	Quarter	Negative	Noun
11	Off	Negative	Adjective
12	Chafing shortness	Negative	Adjectival phrase
13	Chafing shortness	Negative	Adjectival phrase
14	Bruised leaves	Negative	Adjectival phrase
15	The rope	Neutral	Noun phrase

16	Rope and tortoise	Neutral	Complement
17	Pieces	Negative	Noun
18	Short	Negative	Adverb
19	Pieces	Negative	Noun
20	In two	Negative	Prepositional phrase
21	Up	Negative	Adjective
22	Interrupting	Negative	Verb
23	Help	Positive	Verb
24	I did not just	Positive	Noun phrase
25	He can	Positive	Noun phrase
26	He doesn't	Negative	Noun phrase
27	Neater bits	Positive	Adjectival phrase
28	Screams	Negative	Verb
29	Clean up	Positive	Verb phrase
30	Hair	Neutral	Noun
31	Why	Negative	Adverb
32	Why	Negative	Adverb
33	Off	Negative	Adverb
34	Cleans	Positive	Verb
35	Down	Negative	Adverb
36	Short	Negative	Noun
37	Framed	Positive	Verb
38	In	Negative	Preposition
39	Whip	Negative	Noun
40	Subsides	Negative	Noun
41	Did not	Negative	Auxiliary
42	Fresh	Positive	Adjective
43	Coupons	Positive	Noun
44	Fiery	Negative	Adjective

The examples below give instances where the lexical item *cut* has negative connotation in examples (5), (6), and (7):

5) Line 19: … imagined Papa-Nnukwu's body being cut into **pieces** that small…

6) Line 22… Aunty Ifeoma cut in, quickly, **interrupting** her friend.

7) Line 44: … when the lightning cut **fiery** lines through the sky.

From the examples above, it is observed that *pieces, interrupting* and *fiery* in (5), (6), and (7) respectively, give the verb *cut* a negative meaning. Also, in (8), (9), and (10), the word *cut* denotes a positive meaning as in:

8) Line 4: … considering how often mama cuts them to **decorate** the church alter…
9) Line 5: … his **meticulously** drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each other.
10) Line 43: … where the butcher held up **fresh** cut slabs buzzing with flies.

From (8), (9) and (10), it is observed that *decorate, meticulously* and *fresh* give the verb *cut* a positive meaning. Instances such as in (11) and (12) show that the meaning of the verb *cut* is neutral.

11) Line 15: Nne, Nne, cut the rope.
12) Line 30: You cut your hair?

In (11) and (12) the meaning of the word "cut" is either positive or negative. Hence, it is assumed that it is neutral in both instances.

(D) Semantic Perference

It shows the relation between a word form and a set of semantically related words or phrase. In other words, it is the grouping of words or phrase based on their meanings and/or semantic grounds. In terms of semantic preference, the word *cut* denotes *growth, largeness, length, size* etc.

13) In line 6 …we greeted each other. Her **hair** was cut short higher at the front…
14) In line 17 …of **chicken** on my plate would be cut into three pieces in Aunty Ifeoma's…

The semantic preference in the examples above denotes *growth and size*. (lines 5, 9, 10, 12, 25 etc)

5.0 Summary and Conclusion

This study has been able to examine the semantics of *cut* using Sinclair's (1996, 1998) four categories of co-selection of lexical items. It observes that the lexical item *cut* collocates frequently with adverbs and nouns such as *hair, meat, rope, short* etc. The colligational pattern is mostly common with pronouns (possessive and neuter), preposition and determiners. With regard to semantic prosody, the lexical item *cut* mostly suggests negativity. However, there are also environments where other lexical items that co-occur with the core word give it a positive meaning. The semantic preference for *cut* denotes growth, largeness, length, size etc.

This study is simply an effort to bring to limelight the need for more corpus studies since meaning is not so much centered in individual lexical items but on the extended unit of meaning and/or in relation to other words. It is also expected that this work will not only provide insight for lexical semantic analysis, but also be useful to lexicographers, translators, and language teachers. Also, it will be useful and of great help to students of linguistics and linguistic scholars through stimulating their awareness of word meaning and their usages in various contexts.

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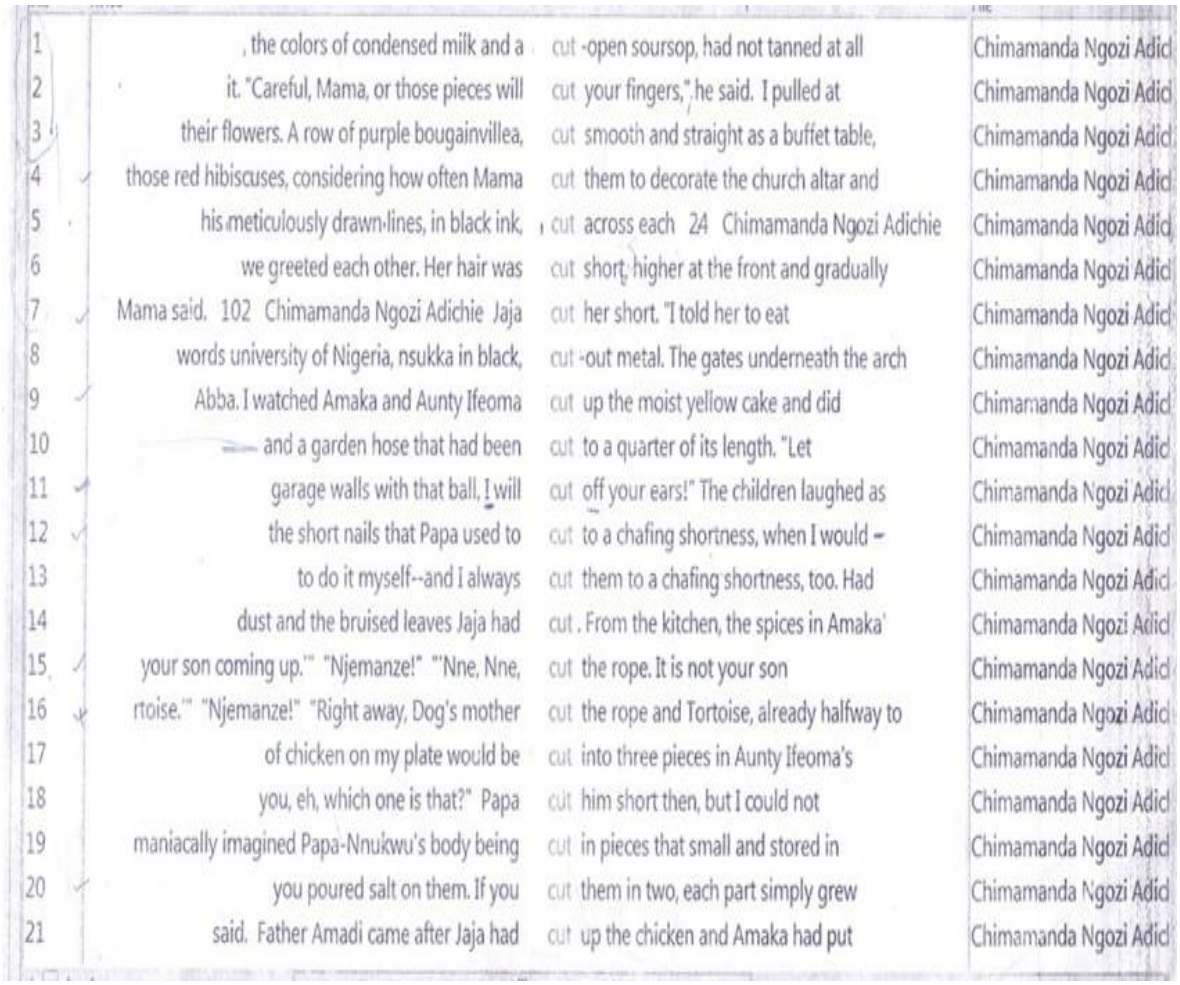
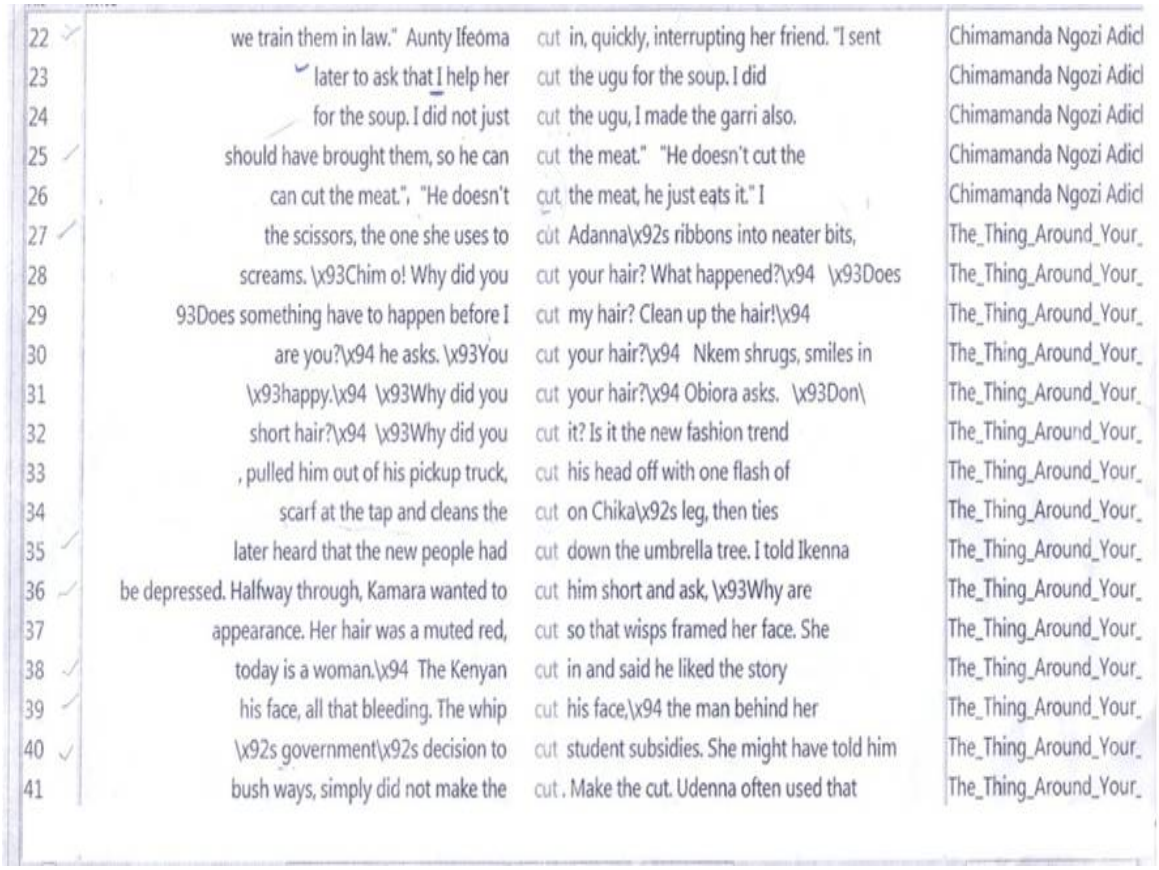
Appendix

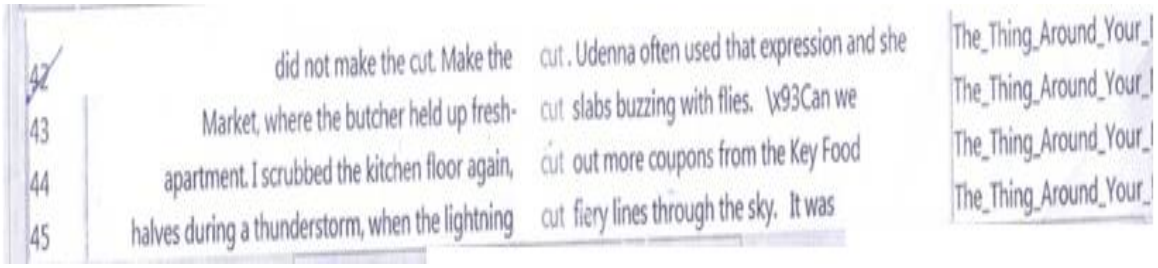


1	, the colors of condensed milk and a	cut	-open soursop, had not tanned at all
2	it. "Careful, Mama, or those pieces will	cut	your fingers," he said. I pulled at
3	their flowers. A row of purple bougainvillea,	cut	smooth and straight as a buffet table,
4	those red hibiscuses, considering how often Mama	cut	them to decorate the church altar and
5	his meticulously drawn lines, in black ink,	cut	across each 24 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
6	we greeted each other. Her hair was	cut	short, higher at the front and gradually
7	Mama said. 102 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Jaja	cut	her short. "I told her to eat
8	words university of Nigeria, nsukka in black,	cut	-out metal. The gates underneath the arch
9	Abba. I watched Amaka and Aunty Ifeoma	cut	up the moist yellow cake and did
10	and a garden hose that had been	cut	to a quarter of its length. "Let
11	garage walls with that ball, I will	cut	off your ears!" The children laughed as
12	the short nails that Papa used to	cut	to a chafing shortness, when I would
13	to do it myself--and I always	cut	them to a chafing shortness, too. Had
14	dust and the bruised leaves Jaja had	cut	. From the kitchen, the spices in Amaka'
15	your son coming up.'" "Njemanze!" "'Nne, Nne,	cut	the rope. It is not your son
16	rtoise.'" "Njemanze!" "Right away, Dog's mother	cut	the rope and Tortoise, already halfway to
17	of chicken on my plate would be	cut	into three pieces in Aunty Ifeoma's
18	you, eh, which one is that?" Papa	cut	him short then, but I could not
19	maniacally imagined Papa-Nnukwu's body being	cut	in pieces that small and stored in
20	you poured salt on them. If you	cut	them in two, each part simply grew
21	said. Father Amadi came after Jaja had	cut	up the chicken and Amaka had put

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi



22	we train them in law." Aunty Ifeoma	cut in, quickly, interrupting her friend. "I sent	Chimamanda Ngozi Adicl
23	later to ask that I help her	cut the ugu for the soup. I did	Chimamanda Ngozi Adicl
24	for the soup. I did not just	cut the ugu, I made the garri also.	Chimamanda Ngozi Adicl
25	should have brought them, so he can	cut the meat." "He doesn't cut the	Chimamanda Ngozi Adicl
26	can cut the meat.", "He doesn't	cut the meat, he just eats it." I	Chimamanda Ngozi Adicl
27	the scissors, the one she uses to	cut Adanna\x92s ribbons into neater bits,	The_Thing_Around_Your_
28	screams. \x93Chim o! Why did you	cut your hair? What happened?\x94 \x93Does	The_Thing_Around_Your_
29	93Does something have to happen before I	cut my hair? Clean up the hair!\x94	The_Thing_Around_Your_
30	are you?\x94 he asks. \x93You	cut your hair?\x94 Nkem shrugs, smiles in	The_Thing_Around_Your_
31	\x93happy.\x94 \x93Why did you	cut your hair?\x94 Obiora asks. \x93Don\	The_Thing_Around_Your_
32	short hair?\x94 \x93Why did you	cut it? Is it the new fashion trend	The_Thing_Around_Your_
33	, pulled him out of his pickup truck,	cut his head off with one flash of	The_Thing_Around_Your_
34	scarf at the tap and cleans the	cut on Chika\x92s leg, then ties	The_Thing_Around_Your_
35	later heard that the new people had	cut down the umbrella tree. I told Ikenna	The_Thing_Around_Your_
36	be depressed. Halfway through, Kamara wanted to	cut him short and ask, \x93Why are	The_Thing_Around_Your_
37	appearance. Her hair was a muted red,	cut so that wisps framed her face. She	The_Thing_Around_Your_
38	today is a woman.\x94 The Kenyan	cut in and said he liked the story	The_Thing_Around_Your_
39	his face, all that bleeding. The whip	cut his face,\x94 the man behind her	The_Thing_Around_Your_
40	\x92s government\x92s decision to	cut student subsidies. She might have told him	The_Thing_Around_Your_
41	bush ways, simply did not make the	cut . Make the cut. Udenna often used that	The_Thing_Around_Your_



42	did not make the cut. Make the	cut . Udenna often used that expression and she	The_Thing_Around_Your_
43	Market, where the butcher held up fresh-	cut slabs buzzing with flies. \x93Can we	The_Thing_Around_Your_
44	apartment. I scrubbed the kitchen floor again,	cut out more coupons from the Key Food	The_Thing_Around_Your_
45	halves during a thunderstorm, when the lightning	cut fiery lines through the sky. It was	The_Thing_Around_Your_