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MAPPING THE CULINARY LEXICON: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF DAGBANI COOK VERBS

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the semantic field of culinary expressions in Dagbani, one of the Maba language groups spoken predominantly in Northern Ghana. Using Cruse's (2002) Lexical Semantics Relation Theory as a theoretical framework, the research focuses specifically on the semantics of cook-related verbs. The study adopts a qualitative research approach by identifying and examining sixteen distinct cooking verbs collected from native speaker usage. The findings reveal that each verb exhibits strong collocational patterns with specific food items, and that the choice of verb is influenced by factors such as the method of preparation, the intensity of heat applied, and the presence or absence of a heat source. These findings have broader implications for lexical semantics and cross-cultural studies of verb classification, offering insight into how language encodes culturally salient distinctions in cooking practices.

Keywords: Dagbani, collocate, semantic field, cook verbs, culinary

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as an important tool through which human experiences, cultural practices, and worldviews are expressed and transmitted. One of the areas where this expression is particularly rich and insightful is in the domain of food and cooking. In many languages, the lexicon related to food preparation reveals deep connections between language, culture, and social identity. This paper presents an in-depth analysis of the grammatical and semantic field of culinary verbs in Dagbani, a prominent member of the Maba (formerly Gur) language group spoken in Northern Ghana. It focuses specifically on the class of verbs associated with the act of cooking, investigating how different verbs convey nuanced meanings while sharing a common semantic core: "to prepare food in a particular way."

The notion of "cook" is not represented by a single verb in Dagbani. Rather, it is expressed through a variety of verbs that encode distinct methods of preparation, types of heat applied, and kinds of food involved. This study approaches "cook" as a semantic field, rather than a single lexical item. It explores how these verbs function syntactically and semantically, the ways they interact with specific noun phrases, and the conceptual

frameworks that underlie their use in natural discourse. Using Cruse's Lexical Semantics Relation Theory (2002) as a guiding framework, this paper will examine the interrelations among these verbs and show how their meanings are shaped by context, usage, and collocational constraints. Central to this investigation is the assumption that the behavior of a verb in terms of its syntactic realization and semantic interpretation is determined by its lexical semantics. In other words, understanding the meaning of a verb involves not just its dictionary definition, but also the roles it plays in actual speech and the constraints it imposes on the elements with which it combines. This perspective allows for a deeper exploration of how meaning is constructed in Dagbani and contributes to the broader field of African lexical semantics.

The study adopts Cruse's (2002) Lexical Semantics Relation Theory as its theoretical framework to examine how cook verbs function within the Dagbani lexicon. The study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What semantic relations exist among Dagbani cook verbs? (2) How do these verbs reflect culturally specific practices and conceptualizations of cooking? The findings not only contribute to a deeper understanding of lexical semantics in Dagbani but also offer broader implications for linguistic theory and cross-cultural semantics. They highlight how verb meaning is shaped by both linguistic structure and cultural practice, especially within the domain of food preparation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Dagbani language is spoken predominantly in Northern Ghana by the Dagomba people. It is one of the most widely spoken indigenous languages in the country, with an estimated two million speakers. Belonging to the Mabia subgroup of the Niger-Congo language family, Dagbani shares close linguistic ties with languages such as Nanunli, Mampruli, Dagaare, Kusaal, and Frafra. These languages exhibit structural similarities in syntax, morphology, and lexicon, and are spoken in adjacent regions of northern Ghana and parts of Burkina Faso and Togo. Hudu (2010) argues that Dagbani has three dialects with slight variations in tone and some lexical words.

According to Bodom (1993), the linguistic similarities among Dagbani, Mampruli, and other related languages go beyond coincidence. He suggests that these languages form a coherent language group, not only due to shared grammar and vocabulary but also due to long-standing social, cultural, and kinship ties among the people who speak them. He

proposes the term *Mabia* derived from the words *ma* (mother) and *bia* (child) as a unifying label that underscores both linguistic kinship and social affiliation. This group exhibits strong familial relations and historically rooted socio-political alliances. Dagbani is an SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) language, a trait it shares with many Niger-Congo languages. However, unlike many of its relatives, Dagbani exhibits minimal morphological marking, especially on verbs. As Kwame (2019) notes, tense, aspect, and mood are often marked by particles or periphrastic constructions rather than by inflectional morphology. This makes Dagbani an interesting language for examining how meaning is expressed through lexical choices and syntactic structure rather than through rich inflectional paradigms.

The lexicon of Dagbani, particularly its verb system, has been the subject of a growing body of linguistic research. For instance, Bashiru (2021) provides a semantic analysis of cut and break verbs, revealing how they are influenced by the instrument used, the object affected, and the intended result. Similarly, Salifu (2021) explores the semantics of eat and drink verbs, identifying key distinctions in how verbs interact with animate and inanimate objects and how they are marked for aspect and volitionality. These studies demonstrate that verb meanings are tightly constrained by semantic selectional rules, and that speakers rely on these rules to produce grammatically correct and culturally appropriate utterances. Despite these efforts, very little work has been done on verbs relating to cooking, which is a central domain of daily life and cultural practice of the Dagomba. Cooking is not only a functional activity but also symbolic as it reflects the values of hospitality, gender roles, communal sharing, and ritual significance. Yet, the verbs used to express various cooking activities in Dagbani remain under-explored in the literature. Similarly, Nurideen et al (2025), demonstrated that cut and break verbs are about different types of separation events with different lexicalization. They argued that BREAK verbs have a transitive/intransitive argument structure and take part in the causative/inchoative alternation; whereas CUT verbs are transitive and therefore require external arguments. They also explored the semantic extensions that are associated with the CUT and BREAK verbs of Dagbani. They found that while *ɲmààlì* ‘cut’ is the prototypical cut verb, *kábí* ‘break’ represents the prototypical verb for all the different break verbs.

The review of literature demonstrates that previous research on Dagbani semantics (Kwame, 2019; Bashiru, 2021; Salifu, 2021, Nurideen et al., 2025) has largely focused on general lexical categories, morphosyntactic features, or broad verb classifications, often

overlooking fine-grained semantic distinctions within culturally embedded domains such as food preparation. This gap has left a critical need for focused, domain-specific studies that foreground how culture and cognition interact through language. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of cook verbs in Dagbani, paying close attention to the semantics of collocation—that is, the patterns in which verbs combine with specific noun phrases. In Dagbani, as in many languages, not all cooking verbs are semantically interchangeable. Each verb typically prescribes or prefers a particular class of food items, mode of preparation, and context of use. This selectional restriction is not random but governed by semantic rules and cultural knowledge.

For example, the verb *duyi*, which can be glossed as “cook,” functions as a generic verb and is often used as a default verb for cooking a variety of items. However, it contrasts with other verbs that specify more detailed processes such as boiling, frying, roasting, steaming, or pounding. These verbs carry distinct semantic features such as [+liquid], [+oil], [+heat-intensity], [+open-flame], or [+contact], which determine their compatibility with particular noun objects. This linguistic phenomenon is not unique to Dagbani. Similar patterns have been observed in the Igbo verb, *ísí* (to cook) which is also a generic cooking verb that collocates with many food items (Agbo, 2009). Agbo postulates that the verb *isi* can take as direct object any nominal that, in an integral manner, implies a food item. The following examples are given by Agbo (2009:72)

Agbo:

- a. *àdá* *sì-rì* *jí*
 Ada cook-TNS yam
 ‘Ada cooked some yam’

- b. *Ezè* *sì-rì* *ánú*
 Eze cook-TNS meat
 ‘Eze cooked some meat’

- c. *Ngózi* *sì-rì* *ókà*
 Ngozi cook-TNS maize
 ‘Ngozi cooked some maize’

While cook verbs usually change to collocate with the noun or the noun phrase, the verb *ísí* remains the same for yam, meat and maize respectively in the above examples. This shows how prototypical verbs such as *duyi* and *ísí* can collocate with many cook items. According to

Oha and Ajuwon (2019), '*Ye* and *din* are both Igbo and Yoruba cooking verbs respectively that describe frying inside oil. The components are “heat in oil” and “heat in container,” and items that get fried in this way include *akara*, meat, yam, potato, plantain, etc. (120). This highlights the importance of analyzing culinary verbs not as isolated lexical items, but as part of a semantic network influenced by cultural and grammatical factors.

Lehrer (1972) identifies ten components applicable to the cooking words in English and other languages described. These are [+/-water], [+/-vigorous cooking], +/-direct heat], [+/-vigorous cooking action], [+/-longtime cooking time], [+/-large amount of cooking substance], [+/-submerged], [special kind of cooking utensil], [special ingredient used or food implied] and [special purpose intended by the cooking process]. Choi (2020) argues that verbs such as dredge, dust, and sprinkle are verbs used to describe the action of coating the food product with another substance, usually flour, powdered sugar, or garnishes. Regardless of the substance being put on top of the food product being coated, “[+Coat] will work for all types of coating verbs.”. Kilgariff (1995) categorizes cooking verbs as a subset of transitive change-of-state verbs, which cause a physical transformation in their direct object. For example, the English verb *bake* involves indirect heat, transformation, and often refers to flour-based food products. Similarly, Dardis (1983) describes the Spanish verb *hornear* (to bake) means to cook by indirect heat in the oven and is used primarily for bread, pastries, cookies, cakes – all those flour products which, in Spanish, are collectively referred to as *fruta de horno* “fruit of the oven.”

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the semantics of cooking verbs in Dagbani. Data for the study were drawn from both primary and secondary sources, relying on native speaker intuition, field recordings, and lexicographic materials. The primary data were collected through voice recordings and interviews conducted with native speakers of Dagbani, while the secondary data were sourced from established Dagbani dictionaries and related linguistic works. The secondary sources included three authoritative Dagbani dictionaries: Mahama (2003, 2010) and Naden (2014). These texts provided a list of cooking-related verbs, from which a preliminary sample was drawn. Particular attention was paid to verb definitions, usage examples, and collocational patterns related to food preparation.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select ten native speakers, ensuring representation from the Tomosili and Nanuni dialects of Dagbani. These dialects were selected based on their geographic proximity to the researchers, as well as their relevance in capturing regional lexical variations within the language. Participants included fluent speakers with a rich understanding of traditional culinary terminology and practices. Voice recordings were made during semi-structured interviews, where participants were asked to describe different cooking methods and the verbs typically associated with them. In addition to eliciting spoken data, the researchers utilized intuition as native speakers of Dagbani, drawing on their own linguistic competence to analyze patterns of usage and to interpret the semantic constraints of the verbs collected. This introspective method complemented the empirical data and enhanced the cultural and linguistic validity of the analysis.

In total, seventeen (17) distinct cooking verbs were identified and analyzed. The linguistic analysis focused on semantic features such as method of preparation, type of heat, texture of the food, and compatibility with specific noun phrases. The goal was to map out the semantic field of cooking in Dagbani and to identify the selectional restrictions and semantic relationships that govern verb usage in this domain.

Thematic analysis of the data was primarily inductive, allowing semantic categories to emerge from the data rather than imposing a priori. However, this inductive process was guided by the principles of Cruse's (2002) Lexical Semantics Relation Theory, particularly in identifying sense relations such as synonymy, hyponymy, and incompatibility. This dual approach ensured both theoretical rigor and cultural sensitivity. To ensure the accuracy and cultural appropriateness of the lexical items under study, the researchers consulted two expert lecturers from the Department of Ghanaian Languages at the University of Education, Winneba–Ajumako. These language experts, with specialized knowledge in Dagbani, were engaged in semi-structured interviews to validate the initial data set. They also provided clarifications on dialectal variations and helped refine the semantic distinctions among the verbs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This aspect of the paper presents the findings and discussion of the semantics of cook verbs in Dagbani. The analysis is categorized into three (3) main thematic areas, the various cook verbs identified in Dagbani, the componential analysis of the semantics of cook verbs

in Dagbani, and the various semantics implications of these verbs. Seventeen (17) sample cook verbs are identified and discussed.

Table1. List of the selected 17 cook verbs in Dagbani

S/N	Cook Verb	Gloss	Examples of food item
1.	<i>duyi</i>	Cook/boil	Yam
2.	<i>Moni</i>	Brown	Tz, banku, rice bowls
3.	<i>Waai</i>	Poach/parboil	Meat, groundnut, vegetables
4.	<i>Chim</i>	Fry/sauté	Kooshe, yam
5.	<i>kɔyi</i>	Cook	Porridge
6.	<i>Saligi</i>	Cook	Porridge
7.	<i>To</i>	Pound	Fufu
8.	<i>She</i>	Roast	Yam, meat, groundnut
9.	<i>ɲɔ</i>	broil/smoke'	Meat, fish
10.	<i>nyeligi</i>	Melt	Stew
11.	<i>Maali</i>	Scallops	Bread, local cake
12.	<i>Gari</i>	Mix	Gari
13.	<i>Bu</i>	Mix with small water	Gari
14.	<i>lɔhi</i>	Mix with water	Gari
15.	<i>Tuui</i>	Mash	Maasa and milk
16.	<i>Tiligi</i>	simmer'	Old cooked food
17.	<i>Sam</i>	Mash	Kenkey, yam,

The semantics of cook verbs in Dagbani

This aspect of the study is where we carefully look at various cook verbs in Dagbani. All the seventeen (17) cook verbs are analyzed semantically and given examples to support them.

The prototypical verb *duyi* 'cook'

The verb *duyi* in Dagbani functions as the prototypical verb within the semantic field of cooking. It broadly denotes the human activity of preparing food and is the default semantic meaning inferred when referring to the act of making food edible. As such, *duyi* serves as a superordinate term under which more specific cooking verbs are semantically subordinated. It is the verb most that comes to the speaker's mind semantically when referring to the general

concept of food preparation. One of the key semantic features of *duyi* is its collocational flexibility. It can co-occur with a wide range of noun phrases (NPs) that denote various food items. This versatility supports its status as the prototypical cooking verb in Dagbani. Additionally, *duyi* is often used in contexts where the specific food being prepared is either not mentioned or is implicitly understood, further demonstrating its generalized semantic scope. The following examples illustrate the typical uses of *duyi* in natural discourse:

- (1) a. *Ti kuli ti duiy bɪnshɛyɔ n di.*
1PL go home CONJ cook something FOC eat
'Let's go home and prepare something to eat.'
- b. *Bindiri bo ka bɛ duiy yɪŋa?*
Food WH FOC 3PL cook home
'Which food have they prepared in the house?'
- c. *M ma duiy la sayim zuŋɔ.*
1SG mother cook FOC tuo zaafi (TZ) today
'My mother prepared TZ today.'
- e. *Amina ŋma la pashe ti sam-ba maa.*
Name cook FOC yam give stranger-PL DET
'Amina prepared yam for the strangers.'
- d. *Pa sokam n duiyiri ziri ka di mali.*
NEG everyone FOC cook-IMPERF soup FOC 3SG-OBJ have
dibu.
eat-IMPERF
'Not everybody will cook soup and it will be delicious.'

In example 1a, *duyi* is used without reference to any specific food item. The verb denotes the general activity of cooking and is semantically acceptable in this context because the NP *bɪnshɛyɔ* ("something") leaves the food item unspecified. In 1b, *duyi* is used in a context where the food is not explicitly identified. The question form implies an inquiry into any food item that may have been prepared, and the generalized nature of *duyi* makes it suitable in such an open-ended context. In contrast to (1a) and (1b), example 1c includes a specific food NP (*sayim*, "TZ"), showing that *duyi* can also be semantically appropriate when used with an explicitly mentioned food item. Its usage here reinforces its role as a semantically unmarked or neutral verb for cooking. Example 1d demonstrates *duyi* used in reference to cooking *ziri* ("soup"), an activity that involves the combination of multiple ingredients to produce a uniform dish. The semantic implication is one of transformation

where a change of state involving the combination of more ingredients to form a new one. In example 1e, the verb *ɲma* appears as a variant or alternate lexical form synonymous with *duyi*. Its collocation with *pashe* (yam) confirms its function within the same semantic field. The use of *ɲma* suggests either dialectal variation or lexical alternation in Dagbani's cooking vocabulary, yet it retains the general semantic value of *duyi* in this context.

Moreover, the semantic behavior of *duyi* closely parallels the Igbo verb *ísí* ("to cook"), as discussed by Agbo (2009). In both Dagbani and Igbo, these verbs serve as generic cooking terms, collocating freely with a wide range of food nouns. They differ from more specific cooking verbs (e.g., boil, roast, fry), which impose semantic restrictions based on the type of food or cooking method.

The semantics of the verb *moni* 'stir'

The verb *moni* in Dagbani refers specifically to the act of stirring food during preparation and is strongly associated with the use of a stirring paddle. This verb is semantically distinct from the more general verb *duyi* ("cook") in that *moni* applies to particular stages of food preparation that involve intensive manual mixing, typically in the presence of boiling water and flour-based ingredients.

One of the staple foods among the Mabia language groups is *sayim* (commonly known as *Tuo Zaafi* or TZ), a thick, dough-like dish made from millet, maize, or sorghum flour, sometimes mixed with cassava flour. The preparation of TZ involves a multi-stage process, and *moni* specifically captures the critical stirring phase that brings the mixture to its desired texture and consistency.

The typical process begins with boiling water to a high temperature. A portion of millet, maize, or sorghum flour is poured into the boiling water to form a semi-cooked base. Some of this cooked mixture is temporarily removed. Then, a starchy flour blend—often maize or cassava—is added to the pot, and stirring with a paddle begins in earnest. The previously removed mixture is later returned to the pot to soften the final product. The success of this process hinges on thorough, continuous stirring—precisely the activity denoted by *moni*. The verb *moni* is not restricted to TZ alone. It is also used in reference to the preparation of several other dishes that require similar stirring actions, such as:

- *sayim* – Tuo Zaafi (TZ)
- *banku* – a fermented corn and cassava dough
- *kaafa* – plain corn flour preparation

- *dukuno* – kenkey, a steamed fermented corn dough
- *shinkafa kpula* – rice balls

This pattern suggests that *moni* is semantically conditioned by both the presence of flour-based substances and the necessity of manual stirring during cooking. The presence of a stirring paddle and the physical action of mixing define the verb's appropriateness in a given context.

The following examples illustrate typical uses of *moni* in Dagbani discourse:

- (2)
- | | | | | | | | | |
|----|--|-------------|----------|----------------|----------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| a. | <i>Amina</i> | <i>mini</i> | <i>o</i> | <i>zo-nima</i> | <i>m</i> | <i>moni</i> | <i>sayim</i> | <i>maa.</i> |
| | NAME | CONJ | 3SG | friend-PL | FOC | stir | TZ | DEF |
| | 'Amina and her friends prepared the TZ.' | | | | | | | |
-
- | | | | | | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|--------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| b. | <i>O</i> | <i>sa</i> | <i>moni</i> | <i>kaafa</i> | <i>ti</i> | <i>bara</i> | <i>maa.</i> |
| | 3SG | TD | stir | kaafa | give | patient | DEF |
| | He/She stirred kaafa for the patient. | | | | | | |
-
- | | | | | | |
|----|--|---------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| c. | <i>Dukuno</i> | <i>monibu</i> | <i>bɔri</i> | <i>yaa</i> | <i>pam.</i> |
| | Kenkey | stir-IMPERF | want | energy | much |
| | Stirring kenkey demands a lot of strength. | | | | |

In example 2a, *moni* is used with *sayim* (TZ), a dish that requires vigorous and skillful stirring. The subject (*Amina and her friends*) suggests that the action may require collaborative effort, reflecting the cultural context in which TZ preparation is often a communal activity. In 2b, *moni* is used with *kaafa*, a relatively lighter cornmeal dish. The act of stirring is present, but the nature of *kaafa* implies less physical effort compared to *sayim* or *dukuno*. In 2c, the use of *monibu*, the imperfective form of *moni*, emphasizes an ongoing action, while the phrase *bɔri yaa pam* ("requires a lot of strength") highlights the physical demand associated with the verb.

The semantics of the verb *waai* 'poach'

The Dagbani verb *waai* refers to a specific method of cooking that involves using a small quantity of water to partially cook food. Semantically, *waai* denotes a preliminary cooking process, where the food item is heated—usually to soften it, infuse it with flavor, or ready it for a subsequent stage of cooking such as frying or boiling. While some foods subjected to *waai* may be edible after this process, the primary intent is often to prepare the item for further processing. The most common food items that usually undergo *waai* are meat and fish. Other food items such as *shinkaafa* ('rice'), *kpihi* ('shell-nuts'), and *sima* ('groundnuts') also undergo *waai*, though in these contexts the process serves different

functional goals. For example, *waai* is used with *kpihi* and *shinkaafa* to facilitate the removal of outer shells, rather than to prepare the item for immediate consumption. When *sima* (groundnut) is fresh, it also goes through *waai* with the interest for eating. The following examples (3a–3c) illustrate the varied semantic applications of *waai*:

(3) a. *Awabu waai nimdi ni o chim.*

NAME poach meat CONJ 3SG fry

‘Awabu poached meat to fry’.

b. *Sim-a ka o sa waai ka ti ηubi.*

Ground nut-PL FOC 3SG PST poach FOC 1PL chop

It was ground nuts that he/she poached for us to chop.

c. *Kpihi yi bi waai di ku tooi ηma.*

Shell-nut-PL if NEG poach. PERF 3PL.OBJ NEG break

‘If shellnut do not undergo poached it is difficult to break.’

Example 3b shows *waai* applied to fresh groundnuts (*sima*). In this case, the ground nuts are poached for direct consumption, not as a preparatory phase for further cooking as in 3a. This highlights the semantic flexibility of *waai*, which can either indicate an intermediate process (as in 3a) or a final preparation method (as in 3b), depending on the food type and context. In 3c, *waai* is used with *kpihi* (shell-nuts) to refer to the process that softens the shell, making it easier to remove. The primary goal here is not consumption but facilitating a non-edible transformation—breaking the outer shell. This shows that *waai* is also used in functional or utilitarian cooking, where the purpose is to alter the physical state of an item without intending it for immediate consumption.

The semantics of the verb *chim* ‘fry’

The verb *chim* refers to a specific cooking method that involves applying heat to food using oil, aligning with the standard culinary process of *frying*. Semantically, *chim* denotes an action where a food item is placed into hot oil or, in some contexts, into a dry cooking vessel without liquid, allowing heat to transform the texture, flavor, or appearance of the item. As such, *chim* encompasses both wet frying (oil-based) and dry frying (without added liquid),

depending on the context and the food item involved. The following examples illustrate typical uses of *chim*:

4. a. *Adama chim la zahim ti o bi-hi.*
 NAME fry-PERF FOC fish give 3SG child-PL
 ‘Adama has fried fish for her children.’
- b. *Mayama chim gabo maa vienyelinga.*
 NAME fry-PERF spring-onions DEF good
 ‘Mayama fried spring-onion very well.’

In 4a, *chim* is used with *zahim* ("fish"), a prototypical food item for frying. The verb here captures the complete cooking of the fish in oil until it reaches a state suitable for consumption. Example 4b shows *chim* applied to *gabo* (spring onions), indicating a light frying process typically used to enhance aroma and flavor. The adverb *vienyelinga* ("well") emphasizes the quality or thoroughness of the frying, suggesting a mastery of the technique and control over heat and timing. Unlike the more generic verb *duyi* (cook), *chim* is semantically restricted to processes involving frying, where the medium is typically oil or the absence of added moisture, and the goal is often to achieve a crisp, brown, or fragrant outcome. It is commonly associated with foods that respond well to frying techniques, such as fish, vegetables, plantains, and meats, where texture, flavor intensification, and aroma are critical outcomes of the cooking process.

The semantics of the verb *she* ‘roast/bake’

The Dagbani verb *she* refers to the act of cooking food using dry, direct or indirect heat, typically through roasting or baking. In Dagbani culinary contexts, *she* is applied to food items exposed to open flame or hot surfaces. For example, yams or plantains placed on charcoal embers or to oven-based baking processes, such as the preparation of bread or cakes. The verb thus encompasses both roasting (direct heat, typically over fire) and baking (indirect dry heat, as in an oven), depending on the item and the cooking method involved. The examples below illustrate the semantic range and application of *she*:

- (5) a. *Dinkugari she la nyuli ti kpariba.*
 NAME roast DEF yam give laborers
 ‘Dinkugari roasted yam for laborers.’
- b. *Hamida sheri la boroboro k̄chi-ra.*
 NAME bake DEF bread sell-IMPERF
 ‘Hamida baked and sells bread.’

In example 5a, *she* is used in the context of roasting *nyuli* (yam), a food item commonly cooked over open flames. The verb describes a method in which the yam is placed on or near fire until it is cooked through. This reflects a direct-heat method, and the absence of water or oil distinguishes it from other cooking verbs. The action described is straightforward and represents a traditional method of preparing yam for quick consumption. In 5b, *sheri*, the perfective form of *she*, describes the baking of *boroboro* (bread). This example extends the semantics of *she* to indirect dry heat typically associated with oven baking. Unlike roasting over fire, baking occurs in an enclosed space where heat surrounds the item.

The semantics of the verb *ɲɔ* ‘broil/smoke’

ɲɔ refers to a specialized cooking technique involving exposure to heat and smoke, primarily used for preserving food items or modifying their texture and taste. Semantically, *ɲɔ* denotes both a method of cooking and a means of dehydration, often applied to meat and fish. This process typically involves placing the food close to, but not directly over, fire, allowing it to cook slowly while being exposed to heat and smoke. Unlike other cooking verbs that signify direct heat or immediate consumption, *ɲɔ* implies a slower, low-moisture process, where the objective is not only to render the food edible but to extend its shelf life. This practice plays an essential role in the food culture of Dagbani-speaking communities, particularly in contexts where refrigeration is unavailable. The following examples illustrate the typical usage of *ɲɔ*:

- (6) a. *Asibiri kam Alimatu ɲɔri la zahim.*
 Saturday every NAME smoke-IMPERF FOC fish
 ‘Every Saturday Alimatu is smoking fish.’
- b. *Tɔha maa ɲɔ la soon-si ata*
 Hunter DEF smoke FOC rabbit-PL three
 ‘The hunter has smoked three rabbits.’

In example 6, *ɲɔri*, the imperfective form of *ɲɔ*, is used in the context of habitual action. Smoking fish (*zahim*) is a common preservation method in Dagbani cuisine. The imperfective aspect underscores that this is a regular, ongoing activity, and the focus on *fish* reflects the cultural significance of smoked fish as a staple component in sauces and stews. In 6b, *ɲɔ* is used to describe the process of smoking rabbit meat, typically done to preserve it for later consumption. This example reflects the utilitarian purpose of *ɲɔ*: transforming perishable meat into a durable food product. It is especially relevant in many rural Dagbani-

speaking households and subsistence contexts where food preservation without refrigeration is essential.

The semantics of the verb *kɔyi* ‘cook’

The verb *kɔyi* refers to a specific form of cooking that involves mixing flour with water and cooking it in a pot overheat, typically without a prolonged stirring process. Semantically, *kɔyi* represents a preparatory phase in cooking, where a mash of flour and water is introduced into boiling water and allowed to begin the transformation into a more cohesive, thicker substance. This verb differs from more general cook verbs like *duyu*, which encompasses a wide range of cooking processes, and also from *moni*, which emphasizes vigorous stirring with a paddle. This process is essential in the preparation of *koko* (‘porridge’) and *sayim* (TZ). In the case of *sayim*, *kɔyi* may precede the use of *moni*, depending on the consistency desired or the cooking style of the individual. The following examples illustrate the semantic range of *kɔyi*:

- (7) a. *Diboriyom kɔyi la duyu ni o moni sayim*
 NAME cook DEF pot FOC 3SG stir.PERF T.Z
 ‘Diboriyom is preparing to stirred T.Z.’
- b. *Bɛ kɔyi-ri koko asiba ya ɲɔ?*
 3PL cook-IMPERF koko morning town this
 ‘Are they selling porridge every morning in this town?’

In 7a, *kɔyi* is used to describe the initial stage of cooking *sayim* (Tuo Zaafi), where flour is first added to boiling water. This precedes *moni*, the more intensive stirring phase that forms the final texture of the dish. In 7b, *kɔyiri* (the imperfective form of *kɔyi*) is used in the context of preparing *koko* (porridge), a common Dagbani breakfast. The verb captures a routine, habitual cooking practice, as seen in the temporal expression *asibaa ya* (every morning in this town). This signifies cultural competence and culinary specificity, reflecting not only what is cooked but *how* and *when* within the cooking process.

The semantics of the verb *saligi* ‘cook’

Closely related to the verb *kɔyi* is the verb *saligi* which denotes a specific form of cooking that involves mixing flour with hot water in a container, away from direct fire. Semantically, it shares similarities with the verb *kɔyi*—both involve combining flour with hot water—but they differ in terms of cooking conditions and heat application. While *kɔyi* is typically performed with the pot placed directly on fire, *saligi* occurs off-heat, usually in a

bowl or container where boiling water is poured over the flour mixture and stirred to achieve even consistency. The semantic distinction between *saligi* and *kɔyi* is subtle but significant. While both may be used to prepare the same dish (e.g., porridge), the choice of verb reflects the method and setting of preparation, highlighting the sensitivity of Dagbani speakers to cooking nuance and procedural detail. Consider the following example:

- (8) a. *Bi' bila ηɔ n saligi koko ηɔ.*
 Child small DEF FOC cook.PERF porridge DEF.
 'It is this child who prepared the porridge.'

In the example above, *saligi* is used to describe the child's preparation of *koko* (porridge). The use of *saligi* rather than *kɔyi* suggests a method in which hot water was poured over flour and stirred in a container not directly on the fire, a process manageable even by a child. The choice of verb here implies a low-risk, accessible cooking method, contrasting with more intense cooking actions like *duyi* (cook) or *moni* (stir)

The semantics of the verb *maali/maani* 'bake'

The verbs *maali* (also realized as *maani* in some dialectal or aspectual forms) represent a semantically rich cooking term that denotes a specialized process of frying, typically in oil, but with particular emphasis on the skill, care, and technique involved. Unlike the more general verb *chim* (fry), which applies broadly to any cooking process involving oil and direct heat, *maali* is semantically marked for contexts where precision, delicacy, and craft are integral to the cooking event. The foods typically associated with *maali*—including *kulikuli* (fried groundnut cake), *maha* (cake or dough pastry), *kpaakulo* (deep-fried crunchy snack), and *boofuroto* (fried sweetbread). The following examples illustrate the typical usage of *maali* / *maani* in natural speech:

- 9) a. *O maali maha Alizumma mini Atani dali kam.*
 3SG bake cake Friday CONJ Monday days every
 He/she bake cake every Friday and Monday.
- b. *Paya kpam-ba n tooi maani maha.*
 Woman elder-PL FOC usually bake cake
 'Usually old women bake cake.'

In example 9a, *maali* is used with *maha* ("cake"), a food that requires careful frying or baking. Although oil is involved, the use of *maali* rather than *chim*, reflects the perceived culinary expertise and deliberateness necessary in producing consistent and desirable results. The regularity of the activity, marked by *every Friday and Monday*, further emphasizes *maali*

as a routinized, skilled practice. In 9b, *maani*, a variant of *maali*, again in conjunction with *maha*. The association with elder women (*kpam-ba*) invokes traditional knowledge and experience-based cooking. The verb here functions not only to indicate the method of cooking but also subtly conveys respect for generational skill and wisdom in culinary practice.

The semantics of the verb *to* pound

The verb *to* refers to the act of pounding food, a crucial culinary process in traditional cooking that often marks the final stage before consumption. Semantically, *to* falls within the broader domain of cooking verbs due to its transformative function, even though it does not involve the application of heat. Pounding, as captured by *to*, is typically performed with a mortar and pestle, and is common in the preparation of specific Dagomba dishes such as *fula*, a molded flour-based dish. In the case of *fula*, the raw ingredient—*za* (millet)—is first ground or pounded into flour, then a small amount of water is added to slightly moisten the flour, and finally the mixture is molded and pounded. In fact, in many traditional cooking contexts, pounding is indispensable for achieving the desired final texture of certain foods and is treated as a culinary technique in its own right. Below is an example:

- (10) a. *Fula bi to-ri araha.*
 Fula NEG pound-IMPERF easy
 ‘Pounding fula is not easy.’

In this example, *to-ri* (the imperfective form of *to*) is used to describe the process of preparing *fula*. The sentence highlights the physical intensity and effort required to complete this step. The negation (*bi to-ri araha*) suggests that pounding is labor-intensive, further underscoring its cultural and procedural significance.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the Dagbani language possesses a rich and nuanced inventory of cook-related verbs, each of which demonstrates specific semantic constraints and collocational patterns. A total of seventeen distinct cook verbs were identified and analyzed, with each verb associated with particular food items and methods of preparation. The selection of these verbs in discourse is not arbitrary; rather, it reflects semantic appropriateness, cultural knowledge, and cooking techniques inherent to the food item being discussed.

The findings strongly support the Lexical Semantic Relation Theory (Cruse, 2002), which posits that lexical items exist within interrelated semantic fields and that their meaning and use are shaped by contextual relationships with other words. In the Dagbani culinary lexicon, speakers consistently select contextually and semantically appropriate verbs to describe specific cooking processes. For example, while *duyi* serves as the prototypical and generic cook verb, others like *chim* (fry), *waai* (poach), *she* (roast/bake), and *ɲɔ* (smoke) are selected based on cooking medium, technique, or desired outcome. The study confirms that Dagbani cooking verbs encode not only literal preparation methods but also social, cultural, and pragmatic meanings. The study further illustrates that Dagbani cooking verbs are semantically sensitive to factors such as ingredient type, heat source, tool use, and cooking intention. This challenges typological generalizations that assume universality in cooking verbs and suggest the need for language-specific semantic analyses. These verbs do more than describe cooking; they reflect deeply embedded cultural practices, knowledge systems, and linguistic structures. As such, they offer a fertile domain for continued exploration in semantics, syntax, and the interplay between language and culture.

While future research could investigate the syntactic behavior of cooking verbs, including verb valency and aspectual markings, this study contributes to semantic field theory and typological linguistics by demonstrating how verbs of cooking in Dagbani are shaped by a culture-specific logic of food preparation. Moreso, the research carries significant implication for lexicographers as the documented collocational tendencies and selectional restrictions of cooking verbs can guide more accurate and culturally sensitive dictionary entries, especially for bilingual or learner-oriented dictionaries.

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