

International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender
Studies (LALIGENS), Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 5 (2), Serial No 12, October, 2016: 25-35

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v5i2.3>

LANGUAGE AND SELF-IDENTITY: MAKING A CASE FOR
INDIGENOUS IGBO NAMES IN NIGERIA'S ESL SITUATION

UMERA-OKEKE, NNEKA, *Ph.D.*

Department of English Studies

University of Port Harcourt

East/West Road, Choba, Port Harcourt

Rivers State, Nigeria

E-mail: nne.supreme@yahoo.com

Tel: +2348083299552

ANYADIEGWU, JUSTINA, *Ph.D.*

Department of English Language and Literature

Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe

Anambra State, Nigeria

E-mail: eschriskn@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

In Linguistics, Semantics (from the Greek *semantikos*, or 'significant meaning', derived from *sema* 'sign') is traditionally defined as the study of meaning. Words are expected to have meanings, names inclusive. Apart from names picked from Bibles or other religious books which Igbo natives choose for what they stand for, many of the foreign names they bear have no connotations/meaning in the Igbo language; so why use them? Why not resort to the language we have that has a lot of meaningful names that cut across everything we want to represent -praise to God, communal effort, mockery and what have you. This paper sets to describe language and in particular naming as a

feature of human identity. It also tried a comparison of the meanings of the English names we bear and advocate the use of names from our mother tongue. It is suggested that this is a step towards sustaining the Igbo language as language and culture are entwined. The paper also attempts to address the threats faced by the Igbo language, which is also virtually faced by many Nigerian languages borne out of Government's ineptitude in implementing language policies and the attitudes of Nigerians towards their mother tongues. The undisputed place of mother-tongue/indigenous languages in the rearing of the child and in enculturation processes and in the education of the child is explored.

Key Words: culture, naming and self-identity, mother tongue, nominative determinism

INTRODUCTION

Though given of names is universal for all cultures, differences exist from one culture to another in how names are given. In Igbo culture, Nigeria, names are determined according to very definite and specific rules. Children may get their names from the deities, totems and family trees of their parents; events that took place when the mother was pregnant may also determine the names they give to their children or names may be divined through magic and incantation, often times named after who reincarnated the baby. In some cases, the name given at birth is only the first of several names a person will bear throughout life as the father, mother, grand parents have each a name for the baby. Through adulthood, the individual acquires additional names, often given to mark important milestones in life, or for titles taken, or to ward off evil spirits by tricking them into thinking that the person with the old name has disappeared.

The importance of naming is underscored by the fact that at time people quarrel over who gives a child a name or when somebody is not allowed to do same. It should be noted here that names are not just given. It is often accompanied by some elaborate rituals to show its significance in the society.

By name giving and acquisition of an identity, it is like the child has entered into a symbolic contract with his/her society. The society confirms the individual's existence and acknowledges its responsibilities toward that person when they give name to a child at birth. The name differentiates the child from others; thus, the society will be able to treat and deal with the child as someone with needs and feelings different from those of other people. Through the name, the individual becomes part of the history of the society, and, because of the name, his or her deeds will exist separate from the deeds of others.

THREATS TO NIGERIA INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

There have been arguments and counter-arguments for and against the issue of English language as the official language/language of education in Nigeria. However, although a united Nigeria rests on English, yet her survival as a nation is beyond

English. Efforts should be geared towards developing and promoting Nigerian languages as national heritage. Umera-Okeke and Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2010) opined that

Nigerian languages express and transmit the culture of the people from generation to generation. The language of any people forms part of the culture and is psychological because language is the tool for socialization, social cohesion and integration. Therefore, our indigenous languages should be appreciated as means of preserving our different cultures

The crux of the statement above is that language forms part of the culture and is 'psychological.' An Igbo child who answers *Patrick, Cletus, and Bonaventure* will be propagating whose culture? The names are not his mother tongue so it probably will take the child up to his adolescent to start seeking to know the meaning of the name he bears or where it was taken from.

When languages are not used, or transferred to children, the language goes into extinction. UNESCO's (2003) Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages noted that:

even languages with many thousands of speakers are no longer being acquired by children; at least 50% of the world's more than six thousand languages are losing speakers. We estimate that, in most world regions, about 90% of the languages may be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the 21st century.

In fact, their record states that Nigeria alone has 23 languages listed which are already extinct. Many of these extinct languages are in Northern States of Nigeria primarily due to language shift, which usually reflects the rise of a dominant culture. God forbids that the Igbo language should be one of these.

UNESCO (2003) has also rightly noted that each and every language embodies the unique cultural wisdom of a people. With the loss of a language, the culture, norms, values and history of the society the uses the language is also lost. We can therefore reason that every time a language dies, there cease to exist ways of understanding its patterns/structure and its function(s) in human society. Above all, for speakers of these languages, it translates to loss of their language and original ethnic and cultural identity.

A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it or when they cease to use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, adults or children (UNESCO 2003). A child who has no native name will most likely not give his own children names from his own language. Is the language not dying by so doing? Name reminds a child of his origin and identity every time it is mentioned. Omo-Ojugo (1989) opined that a first language for a child is a tool which he intimately uses in all

his daily activities and interactions with his peers, members of his family and immediate neighbourhood.

The National Policy on Education is quite clear about language use at the pre-primary level of education in Nigeria. The policy provides for the use of the mother-tongue as the medium of instruction. The intention is for the child's mother-tongue to bridge the gap between the non-formal and formal education which the child encounters at school. The use of the mother-tongue at nursery school is expected to compliment children's acquisition of the language at home. This is also intended to help the children learn about their environment and the social norms of the community/society. These apart, since the mother-tongue is the medium of instruction in early primary education, it can best prepare the children for primary school education. Are names not part of this? A child who calls others by names taken from the mother tongue learn the meanings of these names and by extension masters the language.

However, it is sad to note that what has been stated above is contrary to what operates in reality. English is what is used as the medium of instruction in pre-primary education in Nigeria. The government is not in control of what language is used as the medium of instruction at the pre-primary level since most pre-primary schools are privately owned and the more English spoken at these schools, the more prestigious they are deemed to be.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NOMINATIVE DETERMINISM (ND)

The term Nominative Determinism was the coinage of John Hoyland in 1994. It was first used in *New Scientist* – a popular British magazine. ND is of the view that “a person's name may have a significant role in determining key aspects of job, profession, or even character” (Wikipedia.com). Whether one lives up to his/her name or runs away from it, the name is a crucial factor in developing one's sense of self, and thus helps propel one forward on various paths of life and career. This idea is covered by the theory of nominative determinism, supported by the Igbo saying that – “Aha onye na-achoje ya” literary translated to mean “your name goes after you.”

Some societies believe that one's true name is a serious thing that should not be trifled with. In most religions, to name is to create ("in the beginning was the Word"). Ergo, to re- name is to introduce chaos. Names, it should be noted come from languages; and bearing a name that is not from one's language means losing part of a self-identity. Nominative determinism therefore underscores the present study as names are not just given rather, they are carefully thought after before the naming ritual in Igbo land. This reminds me of my father who when bestowing the title of “Ifejioku” on one of my brothers named him “Eziefaoso” meaning “Sent them running.” When I asked why the name, he told me that since the 1970s nobody in the kindred had taken

that title and that he knew that then, that he started, many will rise up to the challenge and that was exactly what happened.

LANGUAGE AS A FEATURE OF HUMAN IDENTITY

The relationship between language and identity cannot be over-emphasised. Spolsky (1999) describes language as “a central feature of human identity”. The people speak will make others make judgments/guesses regarding their gender, education level, age, profession, and place of origin. According to Spolsky, “a language is a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity” (p. 181). This position by Spolsky shows that language enables us to present our own notion of “who we are,” and is also a way for others to project onto us their own idea and understanding of the way “we must be.” Conflict arises when the hearer has a different understanding of the speaker’s identity than the one the speaker desires.

The issue of the use of language to construct identity has been explored greatly by many. Goffman (1963) has shown that “the self is constructed entirely through discourse, making our language choices of paramount importance to our identity construction”. He attributed our personal identity to how others identify us, not how we identify ourselves. The question is, ‘what image is created in the minds of those who call these names?’ This is unlike those who answer ‘Chukwuebuka’ (God is Great); ‘Chiamaka’ (God is Good) or ‘Onyinyechukwu’ (Gift from God) to mention but a few. Our name ought to come from our native language and culture because it is a link to our identity. In the words of Gibson (2004),

The cultural identity of certain minority groups is tied to the use of their primary tongue... Although an individual may learn English and become assimilated into American society, his primary language remains an important link to his ethnic culture and identity. The primary language not only conveys certain concepts, but is itself an affirmation of that culture (p. 21).

The fact remains that names are a part of every culture and are seen as of great importance to both the people who receive names and to the societies that give them.

NAMING AND SELF-IDENTITY: MAKING A CASE FOR IGBO NAMES

There is a connection between the perceptual world into which one finds him/herself, and the linguistic world in which one becomes both a self and a member through receiving a name (Tschaepe, 2003, p. 67). Tschaepe (2003) supported his view by quoting Merleau-Ponty’s theories, one of which says that

first-naming is not only significant, but performs a very specific function within language use that implies dynamics of power and identity insofar as the first name not only grants one a specific identity

as a language user, but also directs who that person is and will be through the name's physiognomy and reference to the world. The name is both a liberation through identity and a powerful order of limitation through its physiological and referential bondage (pp. 67-68).

The names parents choose for their children reflect the relationship between name and identity. The sense of personal identity and uniqueness that a name gives us is at the heart of why names interest us and why they are important to us as individuals and to our society as a whole. In spite of their importance, though, most people know very little about names and about the effects they have on us and on our children in everyday life. In a very real sense, we are consumers of names, and we have a need and right to know about the psychological, magical, legal, religious, and ethnic aspects of our names.

When children are given names from other languages aside the mother tongue, no meaning is attached and no identity is formed. Such names are often given because they sound fine to our ears or someone we admire bears that as a name. Let us remember when Obama won the presidential election to rule the United States of America, many children that were given birth to then were named after him or after his wife Mitchell. These names mean nothing to an Igbo man. These names have not identified with the culture where the named come from. "As has often been said, for the child the thing is not known until it is named, the name is the essence of the thing and resides in it on the same footing as its colour and form" (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Children begin to develop a sense of identity as individuals and as members of groups from their earliest interactions with others. According to Tschaepe (2003),

the human person is born into a world that includes both language and a community of language users. Upon being thrust into the world, however, the individual does not immediately exist as a member of such a community. Rather, s/he must become a member of that community through the acquisition of language. The acquisition of language does not simply involve gaining the ability to *use* language, but also being deemed a member of the community of language users itself (p.73).

In other words, the first that happens to an individual in a society is to be named before he could be allowed to gain access to the community. It then means that one of the most basic types of identity is ethnic identity, which entails an awareness of one's membership in a social group that has a common culture. McLaughlin and McLeod (1996) posit similarly that

Participation in cultural activities with the guidance of more skilled partners enables children to internalize the tools for thinking and for

taking more mature approaches to problem solving that are appropriate in their culture. Individual development is mediated by interactions with people who are more skilled in the use of the culture's tools. The development of young children into skilled participants in society is accomplished through children's routine, and often tacit, guided participation in ongoing cultural activities as they observe and participate with others in culturally organized practices (p. 2)

Naming is one of such cultural activities. The significance of names is emphasized by elaborate rituals that almost always have deep religious meaning that accompany it. There is often a link between name and identity in everyday speech, particularly in the words we use in making introductions and in identifying ourselves - "I am (Name)." By intuition, we associate our identity and the identity of the person we are introducing with a name. It is always an issue when someone mispronounces our names. People take offence when not properly induced, especially in public. The reason for this concern is that people generally resent the mispronunciation of their names which amounts to a distortion of their identity.

People see the distortions and mispronunciations of their names, especially on purpose as insults. Names interest us because they give us a sense of personal identity and make us unique. This is also why they are important to us as individuals and to our society as a whole. It boils down to the fact that everyone must know the meaning of their names. In the words of Merleau-Ponty (1973), "the child uses its own name as a self-reference much later than it uses the names of others. The child's own name becomes, above all, a movement that signifies an attempt to "mark" the child's 'place besides others'" (p. 38).

The trend of some priests preventing baptism in the child's native name must be challenged. "Ifeoma, Emeka and Chinyere" can become saints tomorrow just like blessed Iwene Tansi. Today, we have Tansi International College, Tansi Major Seminary and Tansian University, all named after him. He would have lost his peculiar identity if he had answered Paul or Peter because no one would have known which is been referred to. Anybody can be saint; after all, a journey of many miles starts in a second.

What are the meanings of the names Peter, Paul, Stephen, Job, Michael, Kevin/Kelvin, Isaac, Job, Abraham, Mary, Elizabeth, Esther, Judas, Andrew, etc. if not for the Biblical allusions to such names, yet our children bear them; they only get to know what they stand for when they are grown. How do we explain the names "Stone, Cousin, Moon, Real, Pablo, Root, Mac, Neal, Ford, Tom, Booth, Bones, Bush, Chand, Sandox, Fork, etc." some of which are words of the dictionary? When learners of English as a Second language are grappling with the dictionary meanings, they are told that these are also names. Ridiculous!

We leave out our culturally rich names for western names; parents should endeavour to give these names to their children. Below are the meanings of some Igbo names depicting their cultural heritage and beliefs:

SEMANTICS OF IGBO NAMES

Names in Honour of God

Ebubechukwu	the glory of God	Kenechukwu	Thank God
Arinzechukwu	Thank God	Amarachi	grace of God
Chukwuemeka	God has done well	Chidinma	God is good
Oluchukwu	the work of God	Chisom	God is with me
Ugochukwu	the glory of God	Chukwuma	God knows
Ifeomachukwu	Good thing from God	Obinna	The will of God
Osuchukwu	God's slave	Onyedikachi	Who is like God?
Ebelechukwu	God's mercy	Izuchukwu	God's intention
Chilota m	Remember me God	Chinyerem	God gave me
Ifeanyichukwu	Nothing is impossible before God		
Chibuikem	God is my strength	Chimezugo	Go is enough for me

Names Showing Communal efforts and Togetherness

Ikwuka	Kindred is greater
Ohazurumee	Done by all
Oraegbunam	Majority shall not kill me
Obiora	The wish of the people
Orajiaka	Upheld by the community

In Response to Mockery

Chinasaokwu	My God will answer
Chikaodili	It is left to God
Chukwejekwu	God will say
Odinakachukwu	It's in the hands of God
Ilokanuno	more enmity at home
Ekwutosi	Do not blackmail
Sochima	Only God knows
Onyebuchim	Who is my God?
Chimemerie	My God has won
Okwudili	Response in the hands of God

Name after Deities

Ikenga	after the deity 'ikenga'
Osuagwu	agwu's slave
Nwajana	Child of ajana
Nwajagu	child of agagu

Fear and Reverence of Death

Onwuamaegbu	Death kills indiscriminately
Onwuaghalu	Death, forgive
Onwubiko	Death, please
Onwuchekwa	Death, wait
Onwudinjo	Death is bad
Onwuamaeze	Death is no respecter of Kings
Onwuegbunam	Death, do not kill me
Onwukaife	Death is greater than all
Onwuaghamba	No community is exonerated from death

In Recognition of the Land as a source of Fertility

Aniebue	The land has enriched
Analike	Plentiful land
Anarado	Safeguarded by the land
Aniagor	Exonerated by the land
Osuala	Slave of the land
Anekwe	If the land agrees

Named after the Four Market Days (Eke, oye, afor, nkwo)

Okeke, Okoye, Okafor, Nwankwo, Nwoye
Mgbeke, Mgboye, Mgbafor, Mgbakwo

Other Names

Nneka	Mother is supreme	Nwanneka	Brother/sister is supreme
Ifeyinwa	Nothing like a child	Ifunanya	Love
Anulika	Joy is greater	Okwukwe	Faith
Nchekwube	Hope	Njideka	To hold is better
Nneamaka	Mother is good	Nnenna	Daddy's mum

CONCLUSION

Despite the beautiful ideas behind our indigenous names, most people know very little about them and about the effects they have on us in everyday life. It is pertinent that the adults in every society educate the younger ones on the psychological, magical, legal, religious, and ethnic aspects of their names. This paper has shown that the Igbo language has a lot of meaningful names that cut across everything we want to represent – praise and recognition to God, communal effort, answers to mockery and

what have you. The continuous use of a child's native name is part of the exposure to the native speech; he is often called and also calls others by their native names in their day to day communication. Since a child is named at birth and that sticks with him/her, the native name should be given rather than the supposedly more glamorous English names we choose for our children. If nothing else, the child stands to explain the name he bears over the years. Naming has to do with cultural education in first language. This enables the child to understand and appreciate the functions of humans in society.

REFERENCES

- Adger, C. T. (1998). Register shifting with dialect resources in instructional discourse. In Hoyle, S. & Adger, C. T. (Eds.) *Kids talk: Strategic language use in later childhood* (pp. 151-169). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bucholtz, M. (1999). "Why be normal?": Language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls. *Language in Society*, 28(2), 203-225.
- Fishman, J. A. (1991): *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundation of assistance to threatened languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Fordham, S. (1998). Speaking standard English from nine to three: Language as guerilla warfare at capital high. In Hoyle, S. & Adger, C. T. (Eds.), *Kids talk: Strategic language use in later childhood* (pp. 205-216). New York: Oxford University Press.
- FRN (1981). *National policy on education*. (Revised) Lagos: NERC Press.
- Gibson, Kari (2004). English only court cases involving the U.S. workplace: the myths of language use and the homogenization of bilingual workers' identities. *Second language Studies*, 22 (2), spring, 2004, pp. 1-60
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hansen, J. G., & Liu, J. (1997). Social identity and language: Theoretical and methodological issues. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 567-576.
- Manfred, W. M. F. (2004). Problems Faced by Chinese Learners in L2 English Learning and Pedagogic Recommendations from an Inter-Cultural Communication Perspective. *Karen's Linguistics Issues*. Accessed on January 15, 2014 from <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/problemschinese.html>
- McLaughlin, B., & McLeod, B. (1996). *Educating all our students: Improving education for children from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds*. Santa Cruz, CA: National Centre for Research on Cultural Diversity and

Second Language Learning. Available at
<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/miscpubs/ncrcdsl/edall.htm>

- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. Trans. Smith, C. New York: The Humanities Press, pp. 177-8.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973). *Consciousness and the acquisition of language*. Trans. Silverman, H. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p. 38
- Omo-Ojugo, M. O. (1991). Mother-tongue in the development of cognitive abilities and educational potentials. In Ohaegbu, A.U. (ed.) *Theories and their application in the study of language, and literature in Nigeria*, Nsukka.
- Spolsky, B. (1999). Second-language learning. In J. Fishman (Ed.), *Handbook of language and ethnic identity* (pp. 181-192). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Toohey, K. (2000). *Learning English at school: Identity, social relations and classroom practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Tschaep, M. D. (2003). Halo of identity: The significance of first names and naming. *Janus Head*, 6(1), 67-78. Pittsburgh, PA: Trivium Publications.
- Umera-Okeke, N. & Ezenwa-Ohaeto, N. (2010). Globalisation and its effect on Nigeria's indigenous languages and culture. In Chiegboka, A. B. C., T. C. Utoh-Ezeajugh, T. & Udechukwu, G. I. (Eds.). *The Humanities & Globalisation in the Third Millennium*. Chapter Sixty-Eight, Pp. 564-571. Nimo: Rex Charles & Patrick Ltd.
- UNESCO (2003). *In language vitality and endangerment*. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit's Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages. Paris: Fontenoy.