

**SEMANTIC SHIFT ON ANGLICIZED IGBO
PERSONAL NAMES**

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Abstract

This study looks into the phenomenon of semantic shift in anglicized Igbo personal names, investigating how the original meanings of the traditional Igbo names are altered, reduced, substituted or completely lost when transformed into English-sounding variants. Drawing data from admission registers in three public primary schools in Ukwulu community and social media platforms, the research categorizes Igbo personal names based on the messages they convey—such as birth order, especially first daughters like ‘Adaobi’, names based on strong belief In God,

like: ‘Netochukwu’, ‘Udochukwu’. Other names were categorized based on importance placed on parents, on babies, the value and worth of life, impact of human activities on earth, progress, growth and development, human value, physical strength and power, ownership or possession, Igbo market day, love affection, happiness and endearment, experience, emotion and opinion of parents. Anchored on the conceptual theory of semantics, the analysis reveals that traditional Igbo names are rich linguistic and cultural repositories, carrying deep meanings rooted in spirituality, identity, philosophy, and lived experiences. However, the study finds that anglicism strips these names of their semantic depth by removing tonal patterns, morphological structure, and cultural symbolism. Consequently, anglicized versions function merely as superficial labels rather than meaningful cultural markers. The research concludes that while anglicized names may appear modern or fashionable, they contribute to cultural erosion by weakening the connection between Igbo personal names, identity, and indigenous worldview.

Keywords: Semantic shift, Igbo personal names, Anglicism, Anglicized Igbo names, Cultural identity.

Introduction

Name points to the bearer which could be humans, trees, places, concepts. It makes the

thing named distinct from others of their kind. It is a remarkable fact that every person has a name. Surely, no one in the entire world is nameless, poor or noble, hence; parents give a name to every child at birth. A personal name is a name that belongs to an individual and which serves as a label for him or her. It is the distinct identity which every individual bears. Personal names express a person's identity and are invested with a deep significance. They often carry specific meanings based on their linguistic and cultural origins.

Onadipe (2012) asserts that personal names in African context are not arbitrary. They are like sign posts that convey a wide range of invaluable information about the bearers. Also, they are like a 'social DNA' that discloses the identity, family background, family history, family vocation and family deity of the bearer. In consonance with Onadipe's assertion, Faleye and Adegaju (2021) posit that a name is a valuable source of information which can indicate gender, birthplace, nationality, ethnicity, religion and position within a family and society at large. Today, the influence of English on the languages spoken in the world is an undeniable fact, and Igbo language, of course, is no exception. Anglicism refers to the process of making something more English in terms of language, culture or customs. Filani and Melefa (2014) observe that people

anglicize their names to present themselves as being modern and civilized as Igbo names appear to them as being too local for the modern world. It is also claimed that anglicized nicknames are brief and sophisticated (Soneye, 2008).

Ajileye (2011) reports that anglicized names are believed to be modern, brief, compact, snappy, prestigious, elegant, lofty and fashionable. Anglicized nicknames could as well serve as a façade to hide one's true identity.

Literature review

The Igbo naming system

In Igbo society, names are not given at random. Certain events, circumstances, conditions, situations or factors contribute to the names an individual bears or is given by the family. According to Ubahaekwe (1981), "names are far from being meaningful marks used from mere identification purpose as baggage tags are". The Igbo have a great attachment to their names. The relationship between the bearer of a name and the name he bears is believed to be an intimate one. The Igbo culture proclaims that a name has much to do with its bearer as well as the society. Nkamigbo (2019) asserts that the Igbo naming system depicts the Igbo culture and philosophy because an indigenous Igbo name identifies the bearer as a member of Igbo society and carves a space for him or her in the society. In the

traditional Igbo society, name givers choose personal names that reflect their culture. Notably, she acknowledges that the changing modern and religion influences on the land and the people have left impact on naming patterns. Similarly, Anyachonkeya (2014) asserts that the Igbo do not give names to their children anyhow, that the names they give their children have social, linguistic, historical, religious and philosophical coloring.

Semantics

Semantics is a field of linguistics that studies meaning. It is the study of the meaning of words and sentences. It simply implies how meaning in language is produced or created. It encompasses how words, phrases and sentences come together to make meaning in a language. According to Lobner (2002), semantics is the part of linguistics that is concerned with meaning. Similarly, Geeraerts (2000) defines semantics as the study of language. Ernest (2009) in his words avers that semantics is also called semiotics, semiology, or semasiology. Semantics can address meaning at the levels of words, phrases, sentences or larger units of discourse. One of the crucial questions which unites different approaches to linguistic semantics is that of the relationship between form and meaning (Kroger, 2019:4; Bettina, Igaab& and AL Ghizzi, 2018:264).

Semantic process

Semantic process means expressing the meaning (literal meaning) of some of the data structurally without taking into consideration the circumstances or contexts of the choice of the names. Semantic process in Igbo personal names refers to the study of how meaning is conveyed through the structure and components of Igbo personal names, including the use of instances, historical references, cultural associations, and symbolism within the name itself and how these meanings can evolve overtime through usage and social perception.

Key aspects of semantic processes in Igbo personal names

- i. Etymology:** This is the process of examining the origin of a name and its historical meaning, like “*Nneoma*” meaning “*good mother*” from the old Igbo roots.
- ii. Religious connotations:** Names derived from religious figures or biblical stories and carry strong semantic weight, like “*Abraham*” or “*Jacob*”.
- iii. Symbolic meaning:** Certain names can be chosen for their symbolic association with specific qualities like “*Hope*” or “*Faith*”.
- iv. Social class marker:** Historically, some names have been associated with specific social classes, which can be perceived today.

v. Cultural references: Names inspired by popular culture or mythology can carry specific cultural connotations, like “*Athena*” and “*Arthur*”.

vi. Meaning shift overtime: A name’s meaning can change or evolve depending on its usage and association with historical figures or current trends. Iwundu (1994) attempts a classification of semantic categories of Igbo names and finds the following:

Theophoric, Ideational, Monumental, Testimonial, Relational, Solicitor, Admonitory, Temporal.

In a semantic study of settlement names in Igbo language by Okorie (2017), she examines the meaning of various settlement names and how they are derived. Her findings show that settlement names have meaning; some have descriptive information identifying the bearers in terms of their deeds, physical strength and to their personalities. More so, people’s professions, commercial activities and geographical features have immensely influenced the meaning of naming patterns of settlement names in Amasiri.

Theoretical framework

This study hinges on the conceptual theory of semantics. Conceptual semantics is a framework for semantic analysis developed mainly by Ray Jackendoff in 1976. It aims at providing a characterization of the conceptual elements by

which a person understands words and sentences. It is concerned with the relationship between language and thought, particularly how linguistic expressions reflect and structure our conceptual understanding of the world. It examines how meaning is derived from cognitive processes such as categorization, metaphor and mental representation. Conceptual semantics explores the underlying concepts and ideas associated with words and phrases, emphasizing the cognitive aspects of meaning. It is the study of words at their core.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design to examine how the meanings of traditional Igbo personal names change when anglicized. Data were collected from admission registers of three public primary schools in Ukwulu community and from Facebook profiles, providing both formal and social sources of Igbo names. The names were compiled in pairs—original Igbo forms and their anglicized versions.

Using semantic analysis, the names were examined for their literal meanings, morphological structure, tonal patterns, cultural significance, and the messages they convey. The Igbo names were categorized into semantic groups such as birth order, belief in God, parental significance, value of life, human characteristics,

cultural worldview, and parental experiences. The anglicized versions were then analyzed to determine how anglicism alters or removes the original meanings. The study is guided by the Conceptual Theory of Semantics, which explains how meaning is structured and understood in the mind.

Data Presentation And Analysis

The results and discussion of this study were based on the Igbo personal names copied from the admission registers of the three public primary schools in the Ukwulu community and the social media platform (Facebook).

Some of the Igbo personal names and their anglicized versions

The Igbo personal names that sound more English than Igbo.

1. Original Igbo personal names

Anglicized version

- | | |
|-------------|-------|
| 1. Àdañnàya | Naya |
| 2. Àdaōbi | Dobby |
| 3. Àdaòrà | Dora |
| 4. Àdaùkè | Duke |
| 5. Afoma | Fomy |
| 6. Àmàechi | Meche |

7. Àmāobì	Mobis
8. Àzikìwe	Zik
9. Àzùbùike Bèsarachī	zuby Besa
10. Bèlùòlisà	Bosah
11. Chèkwube	Chekwus
12. Chiàmaka	Makas
13. Chiàsọka	Soka
14. Chiàgozie	Gozy
15. Chibùike	Chibyke
16. Chibūzò	Chizo
17. Chichèkwa	Chekwas
18. Chidèbe	Debby
19. Chiderà	Dera
20. Chidīèbùbè	Buby
21. Chièdozie	Dozzy
22. Chiekèzie	Kezzy
23. Chielòzònàm	Zona
24. Chiezùgo	Zugo
25. Chigàemezù	Gamez
26. Chijròkè	CJ

27. Chikàjìmà	Kaima
28. Chikàdìbì	Chikas
29. Chikàmdàbèrè	Dabby
30. Chilòta	Lota
31. Chīmāmānda	Mandy
32. Chimàobì	Moby
33. Chimèzie	Chime
34. Chinàechèrem	Chez
35. Chināsà	Nasa
36. Chinàza	Nazzy
37. Chinēlò	Nelly
38. Chinènye	Chinny
39. Chinòhso	Nony
40. Chinònyerem	Nomzy
41. Chinyèrèùgò	Rugo
42. Chioma	Chomy
43. Chisìmdì	Simdy
44. Chisòm	Sommy
45. Chizàràmm	Zara

46. Chizitèrèm	Chizzy
47. Chizīmuzò	Zim
48. Chizòba	Zobby
49. Chizòma	Zommy
50. Chukwudì	Chuks/Chuddy
51. Chukwuebùka	Bukason
52. Chukwuèmeka	Mekus
53. Dàberechī	Dabby
54. Dìarachukwummā	Diara
55. Echèzònàchi	Zona
56. Ejīke	Ejyke
57. Ejìmetòchukwu	Jim
58. Èjìm̀ǹk̀eonye	Ejims
59. Èkentà	Kenta
60. Èm̀elife	Emelyfe
61. Em̀enike	Nike
62. Èsò̀mchi	Esom
63. Ezikè	Zike
64. Fesò̀chukwu	Feso
65. F̀um̀nanya	Fummy
66. G̀aniru	Gani
67. G̀iǹk̀anwa	Nika
68. Ifeanàchọ	Nacho

69. Ijèoma	IJ	
70. Ikechūkwo	Iyke / IK	
71. Ikennà	Kenny	
72. Ikedìmmā	Kedy	
73. Jàachīmmā	Jach	
74. Jàayāmmā	Jay	
75. Kàìmarachī	Kim	
76. Kàchīmghàrìdà		Harida
77. kàìralùchukwu	Kaira	
78. Kànayochī	Kanny	
79. Kasieṁbì	Kasie	
80. Kènèchukwu	Kenny/KC	
81. Kèlechī		KC
82. Kezèbènjō	Kez	
83. Kòsìsòchukwu	Cossy	
84. Lòtannà		Lota
85. Mmadùbukò	Buko	
86. Mụṛfùnanya	Moffy	
87. Mmadùkọ	Duko	
88. Nàetòchukwu	Neto	
89. Ndidìàmaka	ND	
90. Ndùbùisi		ND
91. Nèbolisà		Nebo
92. Ngozi	NG	

93. Ñkèchi	NK
94. Ñkèmdìrim	Kemdy
95. Ñkirūka	NK
96. Nnekà	Nekky
97. Obinnà	Obaino
98. Òkèchukwu	Kechy
100. Òlìsàèmekà	Lisa
101. Oluchūkwu	Luchy
102. Òmàsìrìchukwu	Oma
103. Osìnàchi	Sinach
104. Sòchikàmara	Kamara
105. Sòchukwukàimàrà	Kaima
106. Sòmadiṅà	Soma
107. Soṁkèlechukwu	Soky
108. Soṁtòchukwu	Somty
109. Tòbechukwu	Tobis
110. Tòchukwu	Toks
111. Uchèchukwu	UC
112. Ùdochūkwu	UD
113. Ùjunwā	UJ
114. Ùkàmaka	UK
115. Ùwàezùòkè	Uwas
116. Ùzònnà	Zonny
117. Zànụmèkpere	Zanny

118. Zèlụwà	Zel
119. Zikọrànàìbùchi	Ziko
120. Zinàchidìmmā	Zina

The semantic analysis of the Igbo personal names

Here are the Igbo personal names and their semantic analysis:

Igbo personal names based on birth order, specifically first daughters.

Àdánnyá ‘her father’s first daughter’, Àdaōbi ‘first daughter of a king’, Àdaòrà ‘first daughter of the crowd’, Àdaùkè ‘first daughter of Uke town in Anambra state’.

Discussion

These names in Igbo culture reflect birth order. Igbo parents acknowledge that names are given based on the position of the child. The first daughter in Igbo culture is solely valued. She is typically given a special name to signify her importance.

Igbo personal names based on belief in God

Bèsarachi ‘cry unto God’, Bèlụòlìsà ‘apart from God’, Chèkwube ‘hope’, Chiàmaka ‘beauty’, Chiàsọka ‘God is so sweet’, Chiàgọzie ‘God has blessed’, Chibùiké ‘God is strength’, Chibūzò ‘God is first’, Chichèkwa ‘God protect’, Chidèbe ‘God keep’, Chiderà ‘If God writes...’,

Chidīèbùbè ‘God is glorious’, Chièdozie ‘God has repaired’, Chiekezie ‘God has created well’, Chièlòzònam ‘God should not forget me’, Chiezùgo ‘God is enough’, Chigàemezù ‘God will do all’, Chijìòkè ‘God holds creation’, Chikàimà ‘God we know’, Chikàdibìà ‘God is greater than a native doctor’, Chikàmdàbèrè ‘Its God I rely on’, Chilòtá ‘God remember’, Chimāmandà ‘My God will never fail’, Chimaobi ‘God knows the heart’, Chimèzie ‘God shall arrange’, Chinàechèrēm ‘God thinks for me’, Chināsà ‘God replies’, Chinàza ‘God answers’, Chinēlò ‘God gives ideas’, Chinènye ‘God gives’, Chinònsò ‘God is close’, Chinonyerēm ‘God thinks for me’, Chinyèrèùgò ‘God gave crown’, Chioma ‘good God’, Chisìmdì ‘God said I should exist’, Chisòm ‘God is with me’, Chizàràam ‘God answered me’, Chizitèrèm ‘God sent me’, Chizīmuzò ‘God show me the way’, Chizòba ‘God save’, Chizòma ‘God save’, Chukwudì ‘God exists’, Chukwuebùka ‘God is very big’, Chukwuèmeka ‘God has done mightily’, Dàberechī ‘rely on God’, Djàrachukwummā ‘be good for God’, Echèzònàchi ‘do not forget God’, Ejìmetòchukwu ‘I glorify God’, Èsòmchi follow God’, Fesòchukwu ‘serve only God’, Ikechūkwu ‘God’s strength’, Ikennà ‘God’s strength’, Jàachīmma ‘praise God’, Jaayamma ‘praise him’, Kàìmarachī ‘let’s know God’, Kàchīmghàrìdà ‘let God not fall’, Kàìralùchukwu

‘let’s leave for God’, Kànyòchī ‘let’s be begging God’, Kènèchukwu ‘thank God’, Kèlechī ‘thank God’, Kòsìsòchukwu ‘as it pleases God’, Nàetòchukwu ‘be praising God’, Nèbolìsà ‘look unto God’, Ngozì ‘blessing’, Nkèchi ‘God’s own’, Òkèchukwu ‘God’s share’, Òlìsàèmekà ‘God did great’ Oluçhūkwi ‘God’s work’ Òmàsìrìchukwu ‘as it pleases’, Osìnàchi ‘it is from God’, Sòchikāmàrà ‘only God knows better’, Sòchukwukàimàrà ‘it’s only God that I know’, Soṁkèlèchukwu ‘thank God with me’, Soṁtòchukwu ‘praise God with me’, Tòbèchukwu ‘be praising God’, Tòchukwu ‘praise God’, Uchèchukwu ‘God’s will’, Udochūkwi ‘God’s peace’, Ukàmaka ‘church is fine’, Zànuṁkèpèrè ‘answer my prayer’, Zìkòràràìbùchì ‘show the world that you are God’ Zìnàchidìmmā ‘show that God is good’.

Discussion

These names above are clear indication that Igbo people are predominantly Christians. They are staunch believers. Even the non-Christians who are traditionalists still fall back to Igbo names signifying their staunch belief in God.

Names based on importance placed on parents.

Nneka ‘mother is greater’, Obìnnà ‘father’s heart’, Uçònnà ‘father’s way’.

Discussion

Igbo names reflect family values and relationships. It shows parental joy, pride, love and affection parents have for their children. These names not only reflect the values and beliefs of Igbo people but also serve as a means of preserving cultural heritage and identity.

Names portraying the importance of babies.

Gīnīkànwā ‘what is greater than a child?’,
Ùjunwā ‘child of abundance’

Discussion

The Igbo names above emphasize that babies are gifts from God, reflecting their sacred value. They offer a unique window into the cultural values and beliefs surrounding babies. These names not only reflect the joy and celebration surrounding the arrival of a new baby but also emphasize the significance of babies in continuing family legacies and achieving greatness.

Names emphasizing the value and worth of life

Ndùbùisi ‘life is the utmost’, Sòmadiṅà ‘only I should not exist’

Discussion

These Igbo personal names reflect the importance of life emphasizing its sacredness, value and worth. They also highlight the significance of life’s purpose and creation.

Names symbolizing the impact of human activities on earth

Ùwàezùòkè ‘earth is incomplete’, Zèlùwà ‘avoid the world’

Discussion

These Igbo personal names reflect the inconsistent nature of the earth and the impact of human activities on the earth. There are categories of human on earth, the wealthy and poor, humane and evil.

Names portraying progress, growth and development

Gànrìrù ‘excel’, Ñkírùkà ‘the future is bigger’

Discussion

These Igbo personal names reflect the importance of progress, growth and development in Igbo culture. They also highlight the value placed on achievement, success and forward movement.

Names signifying human value

Mmadùbukò ‘human is pride’, Mmadùkò ‘beauty is scarce’

Discussion

These Igbo personal names highlight the importance of human value, dignity, strength, relationship and potentials in Igbo culture. They emphasize the significance of human life and the

importance of recognizing and respecting human worth.

Names symbolizing physical strength and power

Àzìkìwè ‘full of vigor’, Àzùbùike ‘back is strength’
Ejìkè ‘they hold power’, Emenike ‘do not do forcefully’,
Ezìkè ‘good strength’, Ikedìmmā ‘strength is good’

Discussion

These Igbo names above exhibit strength and power in diverse forms. These include physical strength, spiritual authority, leadership and inner resilience. They reflect the importance of these values in Igbo culture.

Names emphasizing ownership or possession

Èjìm̀ǹkeonye ‘who am I with his own?’
Ñkèmdìrìm̀ ‘my own should be for me’

Discussion

These Igbo personal names highlight the importance of ownership in Igbo culture.

Names reflecting Igbo market day

Èkèntà ‘small Eke market’,

Discussion

Igbo personal names that reflect Igbo market days have cultural significance because they

reflect Igbo values. Igbo culture places a strong emphasis on commerce and community.

Names that depict love, affection and endearment

Afoma ‘good heart’ Fum̄nanya ‘love me’, Ijèoma ‘safe journey’, Mụḡf̄unànya ‘spirit should love’

Discussion

These Igbo names depict love and affection greatly. They are expressions of endearment, reflection of family bonds and relationships. They also show devotion and loyalty, highlighting the importance of relationships and family in Igbo culture.

Names exhibiting the experiences, emotions and opinions of parents

Èmèlife ‘did they do something?’, Ifeanàchọ ‘what is searched for,’ Kasieṁobi ‘console my heart’ Ñdidiàmaka ‘patience is a virtue’, Kezèbènjō ‘let’s avoid sin’

Discussion

Igbo people garner experiences from their daily lives that shape their opinions and emotions towards life. Igbo names are often given at birth referencing an event surrounding the birth. These experiences range from difficulty in conception and probably, eventual difficulty surrounding the pregnancy progression and child birthing.

It has been established that anglicised Igbo personal names do not convey meaning within the Igbo language and culture. This is because the process of anglicism removes the original linguistic structure, tonal patterns and cultural symbolism embedded in traditional Igbo names. As a result, the names lose their semantic depth, their connection to identity, and the cultural values they were meant to express. Therefore, anglicised versions function merely as adapted labels rather than meaningful cultural markers in Igbo society.

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