

## **A Socio-Cultural Linguistic Classification of Names in Edo**

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### **Abstract**

Names are one of the media employed to portray the unique ideology prevalent in a given society and to also identify the individuals that make up such a society. The act of naming which is covered by the field of onomastics has intrigued scholars of various disciplinary orientations over the years especially in the context of Africa (and invariably Nigeria) where a lot of socio-cultural significance is attributed to names. It is in light of this that this study investigated an aspect of the sociolinguistic nature of Edo personal names with a view to gaining the relevant insight into the language in a socio-cultural context. The study was based on the desire to get a proper insight into the socio-cultural nature of Edo language and how they affect the general world view of the people in the process of naming. The study employed as a data collection method, the direct interview of aged native speakers of the language as well as the consultation of secondary published sources (especially on names and culture) relevant to the study. The data collected (which consists of personal names) were analyzed in the context of their assignment. The analysis involves the decomposition of these names into their component units and the interpretation of these component units relative to the circumstances of naming. The analysis was done in line with the theoretical tenets of the socio-cultural linguistics approach (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) with a strong emphasis on the emergence and indexicality principles. The study found out that names represent an important aspect of the semantic structure of Edo language and they possessed a unique compositional nature. It was discovered that these names are expressed following the circumstances of birth.

**Keywords:** Socio-Cultural linguistics, Naming, Onomastics and Edo Language.

### **1. Introduction**

This paper is an examination of the linguistic importance of Edo personal names. Names and naming happen to be of great socio cultural and philosophical importance in Africa and indeed the world over. Many literatures on names known scientifically as onomastics have taken their line or titles from a famous expression "what is in a name"? Names are studied under the field of onomastics in linguistics which means the systematic investigation of the nature of names {Bright, 2003}.

Onomastics as we said before is the study of the history and origin proper names, especially personal ones like 'John', 'Mary', 'Osarenmwida', 'Itohan' and so on. Another term used along this line of naming is 'anthroponomy' which is the study of the cultural importance of personal names. This field of names has attracted a lot of intellectual discourse among linguists, anthropologists, philosophers of language, sociologists and experts in religious studies. The initial works on names by linguists were concentrated on the classificatory functions of names and the relationship between names and social structure (Bariki, 2009).

Attention later moved to the analysis of the syntactic functions of names as more linguists shifted to a detailed study of onomastics.

The present project seeks to account for the nature of names in Edo by the way of examining their compositional makeup (morphology) and the interpretive structure (semantics). The study will be exploiting the core linguistic and sociolinguistic import of names as this will present more opportunities for unexploited areas of our communicative structure.

### 1.1 Edo people and language

The term 'Edo' denotes two distinct concepts. The first represents the people while the other represents the language used by these people who live, dwell and have a common cultural heritage as well as common historical tradition and political aspiration. The Edo a people who are also known as 'Bini's' (Agheyisi, 1986) dwell in the following local government areas of present day Edo state:

- 1(a) Oredo
- (b) Orhionmwo
- (c) Uhunmwode
- (d) Ovia north east
- (e) Ovia south west
- (f) Ego
- (g) Ikpoba-Okha

The people are highly homogenous with little and very accommodating dialectal variations like the Ozas. They represent and hold in high esteem their cultural, historical, religious and social heritage with the Oba of Benin, the symbol and custodian of Edo culture. The term Edo is used to refer to the people who speak either Edo proper {Bini} the language of the ancient Benin kingdom or closely related languages like Esan, Ora, Emai, Yekhee, Etuno and so on. Ethnographic and linguistic studies have shown that the Edo language belong to the Kwa sub group of Niger Congo family of languages. It is also clearly associated with other languages like Esan, Yekhee, Ora, Isoko, Urhobo, Okpe and Ghotuo which is why a famous historical linguist, Elugbe termed these related languages 'Edoid' or Edo.

## 2. Methodology

A central aspect of any scientific investigation like those normally carried out in linguistics is the specification of the approaches and strategies to employ for a successful investigation. This is where methodology comes in and will be treated in this section as consisting of two sub-components as: data and framework. The present research employed both discourse and published information in the course of analysis. The discourse data were recorded by means of a digital phone recorder at occasions of traditional naming ceremonies as well as the direct interview of certain personalities (elderly men and women) who are well versed in the act of naming in the language. These were transcribed and translated on a note and serve as the base for most of the analysis done. In addition to this, the researcher consulted a variety of published materials like books, articles and pamphlets, all dwelling on the issues of names in Edo and some other related languages as well as the general conception of onomastics (the science of names and naming).

## 3. Theoretical Framework

The project will adopt as a formal framework the model of description in Bright's (2003) reflection on onomastics with a theoretical orientation in the line of the socio-cultural linguistic approach (Bulcholz and Hall, 2005). It is a purely descriptive work that will investigate the nature of names in Edo names in African society with special reference to Edo names. The model (Bright,2003) which is purely descriptive work treats 'names' as the crucial point or all life spheres of their bearers, physiological, psychological, phenomenological, logical, dialectal and ontological. A personal name was therefore taken as an individuation of all objects of the same kind.

Names were also treated as a bilateral phenomenon as a result of their linguistic and extralinguistic sense which is to be proven by the functioning of language itself. The working of this model represents a general appraisal of the compositionality of names based on the linguistic strategies employed in their derivation in line with the general word structure of the language concerned and the interpretation of these names relative to the prevailing socio-cultural circumstances of a child's birth.

#### 4. Analyses

This section covers the presentation of data consisting of different names and the categorization of these names based on their socio-cultural interpretation. These interpretations represent the general world-view of the Edo people and a way of expressing the circumstances surrounding a child's birth. The semantic analysis will be treated under the following designated sub-sections.

##### 4.1 Religion – Based Names

The people have different prospectation of God and spirituality in general and these are indicated in their choices of lexical items. In their formation of names associated with God, the people look up human and supernatural powers which make it possible for him to perform great deeds. Therefore, some lexical items are chosen to reflect his greatness as illustrated in the table below:

**Table 1: Names associated with God**

S/N	Names	Interpretation
a	Òsàbúòhièn	God delivers judgement
b	Òsàdébàmwé	God is with me
c	Òsàghàè	God shares
d	Òsàhòn	God hears/answers
e	Òsàígbòvò	God never envys anyone
f	Òsàkpámwà	God uplifts one
g	Òsàrènrèn	God knows/Knowledge is with God
h	Òsàmúédé	God brings crown
i	Òsàrètínmwé	God is my strength
j	Ìjésúròbó	God is the doctor/physician
k	Áíguòsàtílè	no one competes with God
l	Ìkpòm̀wósà	I thank God
m	Áísòsà	no one is above God
n	Ìyóbósà	help of God
o	Èdósà	God's day
p	Èghósà	God's time

q	Ètínòsà	the strength of God
r	Òsàsúmwẹ̀	God is leading one
s	Òsàròbó	God is the doctor

The data in table 1 are names associated with God in the typical Èdo society. These names reflect the paramouncy of the divinity as the earliest ancestors of the people are thought to have a direct link with God (Ogiso ‘king from the sky’). This reverence for ascendancy of God demonstrates the link between the Èdo society and God and the roles he plays in the spiritual well being of the people.

**Table 2: Names associated with deities**

S/N	Names	Interpretation
a	Òkúnwàgué	prosperity is with the ocean
b	Òkúnsúyì	ocean supercedes honour
c	Òkúnròbó	ocean is a doctor
d	Okungbòwá	ocean brings prosperity
e	Òkúnzúwà	ocean brings wealth
f	Òsúnbò	idol is favoured
g	Ògúnbò	god of iron is favoured
h	Ògúnsúyì	god of iron is worth glorious
i	Òviáwẹ̀	ovia has permitted me
j	Òviáhẹ̀	ovia has sent me
k	Áígúókúnruéghìàn	one does not contend with the ocean
l	Ìgbínókpógìẹ̀	I have taken shelter from the almighty
m	Ìgbínẹ̀vbò	I have taken shelter from the town or the people
n	Ìgbínẹ̀dìọ̀n	I have taken shelter from the elders
o	Ìgbínẹ̀hì	I have taken shelter from my guardian spirit
p	Ìgbínósùn	I have taken shelter for the osun (idol)
q	Ìgbínógùn	I have taken shelter from the god of iron

The Èdo people are very spiritual people and possess a lot of deities that are associated with different areas of people lives. These deities are believed to have at one point or the other delivered the people from certain predicament like famine, disease, battles and most importantly in the act of giving birth.

#### 4.2 Politics-Based Names

The Èdo people have high regard for their political institution as represented by such figures, as Oba, Enigies and Ekhaemwe. The Oba is particularly seen as next to God by the people and also highly esteemed. He is believed to possess a supernatural aura around him as God is and this is why the name associated with God can be interchanged with that of the Oba. As a result of this adoration, awe and respect attributed to this and furthermore to cement the common heritage and unity among the Èdo sans their Oba. The names reflecting this perspective are indicated below:

**Table 3: Names associated with political institutions**

S/N	Names	Interpretation
a	Àgbòn móbà	the king is well placed

b	Èghòbámièn	the reign of the oba is prominent
c	Òbàrèdó	the oba is Edo
d	Òbákpòlò	the oba is great
e	Ètìònbà	the strength of the oba
f	Ènòbákhàrè	what oba has decree
g	Èdòbá	the oba's day
h	Òbázèé	the oba chooses
i	Òbàrètín	the oba os strength or power
j	Òbàrigiágbòn	the oba is at the center of the world
k	Òbányágbòn	the oba created the world
l	Òbáyúwàná	to wealth is the kng
m	Òbázùáyé	the king has chosen affluence
n	Áíwèrriòbá	no one overturns the oba
o	Áíguòbásìnmwí	no one can strive with the king's throne
p	Ìkpònmwòbà	I thank the oba

The Edo traditional political institutions with the Oba at the center are one highly revered by the people. The Oba is seen as an institution ordain by God and traditional ruler claim direct link to a divine king (Osànumba 'God'). This therefore informed the association of tradition institutions with the names and identities of children.

#### 4.3 Event – Based Names

Names are generally believed to be tied to the events or circumstances surrounding a child's birth by the Edo people. These names are given as a way of remembering what happened during the particular point in time during or after a child's birth. The table below shows the names given to children to reflect the circumstances or events of birth.

**Table 4: Events based names**

S/N	Names	Interpretation
a	Unúágbòn	mouth of the world (people)
b	Àímiúwúrínmwià	no one sees death to plead with
c	Èdiágbònyà	you stay in the world
d	Áíwúyó	don't die on it
e	Áíwórò	don't reveal the secret
f	Áígbònà	one cannot kill this/this one cannot be killed
g	Èrhùnmwùsé	prayer is heard
h	Òsémwègié	it has to give me honour
i	Ìnuághàtá	how many will you say
j	Áízébámwà	this one cannot be accused
k	Ọnàíwú	this one will not die
l	Úwúígbé	death cannot anihiliate all at the same time
m	Òkùòímósé	war is not beautiful
n	Ògbèbó	family is favourable
o	Ìmáfídon	I did not misbehave
p	Ìdémùdiá	I have stood firm
q	Èwánsìhá	common sense supersedes oracle

In Edo as it is in other parts of the world, the birth of a child is an event of great joy and significance. Much importance is associated with the events that may have attended the birth of a child. It is believed that the name chosen will exert an influence for better or worse on the life of the child and on the family as well.

#### 4.4 Child based names

The Edo place a lot of emphasis or value on children than any other thing. The worth of a man in the society is measured by the number of children he has (this is no longer the case in contemporary times). This is associated with the fact a man's children can help out in his farms and in disputes as well as the general beliefs in re-incarnation. So to portray the importance of a child to the Edo people, names are given with respect to ọmọ 'child' as shown in the table below.

**Table 5: Names associated with children**

S/N	Names	Interpretation
a	Èmòkpòlò	children are so big
b	Ọmọzúwà	a child chooses wealth
c	Ọmọsiviè	a child is more than beads
d	Èmòkpaè	children uplifts
e	Èmọvọn	children are filled on ones emptiness
f	Èmọsẹ	children is enough
g	Ọsàyọmọré	it is God that brings child
h	Ọgbómò	family of children

The names portray the relative importance of a child to the average Edo household as it is commonly believed that the prosperity and integrity of a family lie on the presence of children. These are some aspects of the Edo world-view where a child is treasured above all else.

#### 5. Conclusion

It was shown that the naming of children is of great significance in the African society and it often marked by ceremonies and rituals. Some names are used to mark the occasion of a childbirth like if the birth occurred during a rainstorm, the child will be named thus or if it is during special occasions or activities like celebration, market and farm, the child will bear such name as ugie (ẹdugie 'the day of celebration'), ẹki (ẹdeki (a market day;) and ugbo (edugbo 'farming day'). All these are done to commemorate the significance of these events and what they portend for the child and his/her family. It was also discovered that some names portray, the personality of the individual or his character as well as some important events in his life. There is usually no limit to the numbers of names a person can be given in African society as all that are present during a naming ceremony can give a name to a new-born. Names are also given to some children based on some dead persons who may be thought to have been partially re-incarnated in the child especially if the family observes certain traits in common between the child and the dead relative. In some societies, it is also the custom to give the names of grandparents to the children. These names serve as the identity by which the person is known and can be described. It is expected that as the child grows, these features become more obvious. With the alarming rate at cultural values of minority language like Edo eroding in the face of Nigerian English and pidgin, it is highly recommended here that more researchers



conducted into the nature of naming in the society. This will help give us an insight into the structure and world-view of the people.

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