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**A Speech Act Analysis of *Abiku* Names among the Yoruba Nigerians**  
**Idowu Odebode and Adenike Onadipe**

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**Abstract**

This paper attempts a speech act analysis of *Abiku* names from the socio-pragmatic perspective of the Yoruba, one of the three principal ethnic groups in Nigeria. The basis of the study is to prove that names, particularly the *Abiku* names, serve as means of communication rather than the common function of identification which they are believed to be performing. The *Abiku* names elicit certain illocutionary acts which are unique and far-fetched in other naming contexts. The paper submits that unlike other names, *Abiku* names are therapeutic, magical and ‘semogenic’ i.e. they are rich in meaning and have socio-pragmatic significance.

**Key Words:** *Abiku*, semogenic, Yoruba, Soyinka, still-birth

**1. The *Abiku* Phenomenon**

One of the Yoruba naming strategies that present the philosophical belief in death, reincarnation and life after death is *Abiku* (names). *Abikus* are special children believed to possess certain mystical powers to come to the world when they like and go back to the spirit world at will; hence, they are believed to be spirits. An *Abiku* is different from a stillbirth because the latter dies in form of miscarriage and, therefore, was not procreated into the world at all. The *Abiku*, alternatively, was born and s/he can stay for as long as s/he wishes, then dies and later revisits the family again during the next pregnancy. This circle continues for as long as the *Abiku* wants or the family devises a means of tying the child down. Soyinka (1967:28) captures this situation better when he posits that *Abiku* is “wanderer child. It is the same child who dies and returns

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again and again to plague the mother”. John Otu is quoted by Akingbe (2011) as saying that an *Abiku* has ambivalent loyalty to both physical and mythical realms which strive to claim him simultaneously. “It is in the bid to satisfy the yearnings of these two seemingly disparate worlds that he keeps going and coming endlessly.” (Akingbe 2011:182)

One of the major means of restraining the *Abiku* from going again is through naming and nicknaming. The Yoruba believe that the moment an *Abiku* is given such name(s), s/he finds it difficult to go back. These names range from human anthroponyms to names of plants and trees, names of insects and animals as well as aquatic names. These names are not just given as mere tags or labels; they perform certain illocutionary function(s) within their contexts. This is why our focus in this study is ‘a speech act analysis of *Abiku* names among the Yoruba Africans’ The study is predicated on the following questions:

- (i) What names or naming typologies characterize/ constitute the *Abiku* names?
- (ii) How are the *Abiku* names different from other anthroponyms?
- (iii) How are the names related to nature, the terrestrial and the celestial beings?
- (iv) What illocutionary acts are preponderant in *Abiku* names?

## **2. The Yoruba Nation**

The Yoruba nation constitutes the six major South-western states in Nigeria. These are: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo states. Some parts of Kogi and Kwara states like Yagba and Omu-Aran respectively also have their ancestry in Yoruba. Their presence is also noticeable in Edo State as well as in Port Novo, the Republic of Benin where their community is known as the Ajase. The Yoruba share common geographical boundary and culture. Their occupations range from arts and crafts to drumming, tying and dyeing. They claim Ile-Ife, in the present Osun state, Nigeria, as their ancestral home and believe that Oduduwa was their progenitor. In modern Nigeria, the Yoruba are the most educated and the most sophisticated among other tribes. This might not be unconnected with their early exposure to western culture through their participation in coastal trade, missionary activities and the Trans Sahara trade.

## **3. Methodology**

The fact that the researchers are Yoruba gave them an advantage in gathering information for this research, as language proved no barrier at all. We are both familiar with the Yoruba culture, in particular, the *Abiku* phenomenon. We dwell largely on oral interview apart from other literature which served to validate the data gathered during the interviews. Out of many *Abiku* names gathered, fifteen are randomly selected for this study. This is necessary in order to give the selected names an in-depth treatment.

## **4. Theoretical Framework**

The most attractive feature of the theory of speech acts, which was introduced into the philosophy of language by Austin, is that it gives explicit recognition to the social or interpersonal dimension of language behavior. Austin’s theory of speech-acts is contained in his

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book *How to do things with words* (1962) and later formalized by his pupil, J.R. Searle (1969) in *Speech Acts*. Austin started by drawing a distinction between constative and performative utterances. Constative utterances are statements. Their function is to describe some events, process or state-of-affairs and they (or the propositions expressed) have the property of either being true or false. Performative utterances, by contrast, have no truth values. They are used to do something. For example: 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stern.

In saying 'I name this ship Queen Elizabeth,' the speaker is not describing what he is doing, nor stating that he is doing it, but actually performing the action of naming the ship. From that moment, the ship is named. Naming is therefore a fundamental part of the speech acts and it is our preoccupation in the present study which is designed to examine *Abiku* names in Yoruba context. Thus, to utter such sentence in the appropriate circumstances is not to describe what one is doing. It is the real action of doing it (or part of doing it). Such utterances, according to Austin, are called performatives or performative utterances.

Austin distinguished them from constatives or constative utterances which are used to state a fact or describe a state of affairs. It should be noted however, that only constative utterances can be true or false while performatives can be happy or unhappy. Therefore, performatives lack truth values but have certain acts performed through their production. Performatives can be explicit or implicit. Explicit performatives are the primary performatives because the utterances contain performative verbs. For instance, 'I pronounce you husband and wife.' On the other hand, implicit performatives contain no performative verbs. Rather, their meaning is implied. Examples of implicit performatives are:

I'll be there at two O'clock (promise)  
Trespassers will be prosecuted (warning)

In his further development of the theory of speech acts, Austin drew a three-fold distinction among locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. According to him, a locutionary act is an act of saying, the production of meaningful utterance. Austin (1962) views a locutionary act as:

The utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain words in a construction and the utterance of them with a certain "meaning" in the favourite philosophical sense of that word, i.e. with a certain sense and a certain reference. (Austin 1962:94)

Conversely, an illocutionary act is an act performed in saying something i.e. making a statement or promise, issuing a command or request and asking a question. Finally, a perlocutionary act is an act performed by means of saying something, i.e., getting someone to believe that something is so, persuading someone to do something, moving someone to anger, consoling someone in distress. Austin's distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts is crucial and it is one that has frequently been missed or blurred in theoretical semantics.

Austin further suggests a taxonomy of speech acts according to their illocutionary force.

These are: verdictives (giving of a verdict, appraisal or a finding), exercitives (exercising powers, ordering, advising, warning), commissives (promising, undertaking), behavitives (social behaviours like apologizing, congratulating, cursing, condoling, challenging) and expositives (our clear metalinguistic use of language like 'I reply, I postulate, I argue, I illustrate'). It is an important part of Austin's purpose to emphasize that statements or constative utterances should also be brought within the scope of logical and philosophical investigation. Therefore, Austin's speech acts theory emphasizes the importance of relating the functions of language to the social context in which language is used.

Austin's pupil, Searle (1969, 1979a), popularizes the concept of speech acts. Although he agrees with Austin's illocutionary and perlocutionary acts classificatory paradigms, he proceeds to propose the 'utterance act' and 'propositional act' which are acts of uttering words and in tune with Austin's phatic and rhetic acts respectively. Searle further proposes his own taxonomy of illocutionary acts as representative, commissive, directive, declarative and expressive acts. (See Searle, 1969:33-35). However, Searle draws a distinction between the speaker's (utterance) meaning and sentence meaning. He believes that figurative terms or tropes (irony, metaphor, hints, euphemisms) are indirect speech acts. But the direct illocution of an utterance is the illocution most directly indicated by the literal meaning of what is uttered. In essence, when the three grammatical forms (declarative, interrogative, imperative) and pragmatic function coincide, the effect is called a direct speech act. For example:

- (a) I like reading. (Declarative form functioning as an assertion)
- (b) What is your name? (Interrogative form functioning as a question)
- (c) Get out of here. (Imperative form functioning as an order.)

In the examples above, there is a direct relationship between their structures and their functions, hence, they are categorized as direct speech acts. So, in the case of indirect speech acts, the utterance meaning includes the sentence meaning but extend beyond it. Searle (1979a:122) explicates with the following example:

- (1) Student X: Let's go to the movies tonight.
- (2) Student Y: I have to study for an exam.

From the example, 'Let's' in (1) indicates a speech act of proposal. Student Y's response is a statement which in this context functions as the speech act rejection of the proposal. Searle calls the rejection of the proposal the primary illocutionary act performed by Y and says that Y performs it by means of the secondary illocutionary act i.e. the statement.

## 5. Literature Review

Oyeleye (1985) does a critical work on the significance of names, through his examination of the language employed in Achebe's early novels. He examines how Achebe uses names as tools for identification. Names of things like formalin, damask, velvet, oiled ball-bearings, tarmac, aeroplane and metal (Oyeleye 1985:117) reveal an urban setting. On the other hand features like snake, palm-tree, fruit, leaf, yam and elephant tusks are identified with a rural location. Oyeleye

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further expresses the idea related to the current study by postulating that “In the traditional Africa society, a man’s individuality is often summed up in the proper or personal name he bears” (Oyeleye 1985:137). He equally accentuates that such person’s name is essentially inseparable from him. Inferring from one of Achebe’s characters’ belief in the connection between soul and name, Oyeleye says that the essence (soul) of a man reside in his name. Hence, names in many African cultures, according to him are customarily carefully constructed, to manifest specific meanings, which in a way are supposed to portray the bearers’ personalities and their anticipated societal roles.

Kelleher (2004) reflects on the names given to places (public landmarks) and how such names are viewed by members of the society involved. It is certainly not all these names that were positively reacted to. This can be said to be the rationale behind Kelleher’s consideration of a public naming controversy in Phoenix, Arizona. His purpose is therefore to show how people considered a name like *Squaw Peak* in central Phoenix as derogatory; thus called for a change. Although, Kelleher is historical in the presentation of his ideas, the work relates to this study because, it examines the communicative effectiveness of a name.

Olaosun (2005) employs a lexico-semantic approach to judge the meaning of words in Wole Soyinka’s *Kongi’s Harvest*. His contribution shows how Soyinka uses lexis and names intentionally, to project the meanings, motives, themes and key concepts in the text. This present study also projects the meaning embedded in and the motives behind *Abiku* names. Olaosun examines meanings of words and names at the surface level (lexico-semantic), while this study considers meanings of names at the deep-structural level (pragmatics).

Evans (2007) reveals through his idea of “tsunami curve” that the sudden increase in the in the use of an already existent name is most likely to result from the influence of a particular popular culture or cultural event. He cannot but be commended for his effort made to represent his idea graphologically to guarantee a better understanding. He further explains that the popularity and general acceptability of a name does not just rise to its peak in a day; it starts gradually. Then within three years, it reaches the summit and drops thereafter. A study of how names are responded to in the United States of America makes him to surmise that some names are commonly borne because they are identifiable with trendy artists. An example given is the name *Aaliyah*, which has enjoyed popularity because of the artist’s album “One in a Million”. Also due to the fact that the name Heath appeared in ‘The Big Valley’, an American television program in 1966, American boys found it fashionable. In the case of this study however, it has not been heard that anyone has at a point or the other found anything admirable in being named after an *Abiku*.

Tsaaio (2009) examines the significance of names and the factors responsible for the choice of names in form of oral narratives among the Tiv Nigerians. The work relates to our current study because it deals with naming pattern in the Tiv tribe in Nigeria as opposed to the Yoruba praised in our work. In a related study on naming among the Yoruba especially during the period of wars, Odebode (2010) discovered that war-related names in Yoruba socio-cultural milieu serve as means of validating and perpetuating traceable historical facts.

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## 6. Data Analysis

This section engages in a practical demonstration of the speech act theory being tested on our data. Fifteen Abiku names, which are selected, are analysed below:

### *Kilanko?*

It can be translated as ‘What are we celebrating?’ It is believed in Africa that the return of *Abiku* does not give any hope to his parents. Therefore, they see no reason for which he should be celebrated, since his arrival has brought with it another round of suspense. “ko” is an abbreviated form of ‘ikomo’ which means christening.

In Yoruba land, a female child is often christened on the seventh day, while a male child is christened on the ninth day. This is because it is believed that a male child has nine strong bones, while a female child has only seven weak bones. In the case of a set of twins, *ikomo* is done on the eighth day because, it is said that they share between themselves the number of bones in a male and a female child. *Ikomo* requires a lot of feasting. Some key ingredients of the traditional ceremony are clean water (*omi*), bitter kolanuts (*orogbo*), honey (*oyin*), sugar cane (*Ireke*), salt (*iyo*), dried fish (*eja kika*), alligator pepper (*atare*). Here’s an example of the prayers made using the mentioned items: *Omi ko ni ota. Iwo omo yi. O ni n iota o! araye o ni se ota re.*

Water does not have enemies. This child shall not have enemies. People of this world will not seek your down fall.

In *Abiku*’s case, it is obvious that the reverse is the case, as he is the one seeking the downfall of the people of this world (especially his parents). Hence, *Abiku* is denied a befitting naming ceremony, in an attempt to hurt his feelings and make him stay alive.

The locution is *Kilanko?*(what are we celebrating?) The illocution is questioning. It is a direct speech act because, it is an instance of ‘interrogative used in questioning’. What can be inferred from it is that something that is worth celebrating must have happened. The presupposition is that a child is born and there is meant to be celebration. Searle believes that this kind of name is expressive in nature because, it is an expression of disgust. The name is suitable for both male and female *Abiku* children.

### *Igbekoyi or Igbokoyi*

*Igbe* (or *Igbo*) in this context of the Yoruba culture translates to bush or forest. The meaning of the name therefore is “Bush rejects this.” The Yoruba believe that *Abiku* children are spirits that stay in forests (Clark 1967:71) hence; they are often buried in forests after death. It is a common practice in Yoruba land that people with any abominable challenge (like leprosy, hunch back, *Abiku*) are buried in forests, after death. The survival of *Abiku* is therefore believed to have resulted from the rejection of *Abiku*’s body by the forest.

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The illocution of *Igbekoyi* is 'informing'. It is a direct speech act because it is a case of 'declarative, used to affirm'. What it presupposes is that the forest has been receiving *Abikus'* bodies, but rejects this one. What can be inferred from it is that something serious must have happened to make the forest reject this one, of all *Abiku* children. It is possible that *Abiku's* companions have shown a lack of interest in him or her. There is no reason for which *Abiku* should die, not to talk of the bush receiving his or her corpse. It is an assertive speech act in Searle's point of view because it states a fact. It is befitting for both male and female *Abiku* children.

### ***Ewure***

*Ewure* means 'a goat'. At his rebirth, *Abiku's* parents decide to give him a derogatory name, as a way of saying that the child's worth is nothing more than that of a goat. It is believed that if the child is addressed that way, his or her feelings would be hurt. And he may decide against going back to the spirit world. Also, it is assumed that this kind of name will make the child to become irritating to his or her spirit companions; they will not want to associate with him and this will make him stay alive. Other closely related names are *Ekú* and *Aja*. *Ekú* denotes a rat. It is an animal that is believed to be the ugliest and most irritating of all animals, while *Aja* simply means a dog. A dog is an animal that is always shut out in Yorubaland. So, *Abiku* is expected to be shut out by his companions, hence the name *aja*.

It is noteworthy also that Africans in general, believe that the name given to a child at birth has a lot of effect on his or her future. They are therefore careful in their choice of names. But in this case, *Abiku's* parents are less concerned about whether any of such names, will affect the child negatively. In most cases, the pronouncement of such names as these, is considered as an instance of 'naming as a tool for vengeance'. It is a means through which the parents of *Abiku* avenge the pains inflicted on them by him or her through their naming power. The child is sure to live with the shame in the nearest future.

The illocution of the name (utterance) *ewure* is "condemning". It is an indirect speech act because metaphor has been employed; the child, though not a goat, has been named so. It is therefore a special case of 'declarative used to challenge'. The presupposition is that there is an animal that is called, *ewure*. The inference is that the child must have the behavior or qualities of this animal. Searle takes these names to be instances of expressive speech act, signaled through a declarative statement, 'You are a goat'. The name can be borne by both male and female *Abiku* children.

### ***Durojaye***

*Durojaye*, as a locution, denotes 'Wait to enjoy life (or the world)'. *Abiku* is told to stay and enjoy the good that this world can offer. The illocution is 'imploring'. It is a direct speech act because it is an instance of 'imperative used to command'. Its presupposition is that the child has not been waiting before. Its inference is that there is something that is enjoyable in the world, which the child has been missing. The name has a directive speech act, according to Searle's

classification because, the child is being commanded. The name is more suitable for an *Abiku* male or female child.

### ***Ayedun***

*Ayedun* is closely linked to the previous name (*Durojaye*), but its transliteration is ‘The world is sweet’. As against his perception of the world as evil, *Abiku* is told that the world is interesting. It is a way of trying to persuade him to consider living. The illocutionary act of *Ayedun* is “informing”. It is a direct speech act because it is an instance of “declarative used to affirm”. Its presupposition is that there is a world that is interesting. Its inference is that he has been ‘dying’ because he feared that the world will not be interesting. As a speech act, this name is commissive in nature because *Abiku* is being indirectly committed to living. The name is ‘sandwiched’ between promise and persuasion. It is suitable for both male and female *Abiku* children.

### ***Kokumo***

The meaning of *Kokumo* is that the *Abiku* child does not die again. It is a means that Africans employ to give themselves hope. If *Abiku* hears that he may be appeased. Also, it is believed that such a declaration is capable of rendering every force of death waging war against *Abiku*, powerless.

The locution is *Kokumo*. The illocution is declaring. It is a direct speech act because, it is a case of *declarative* used affirm. It presupposes the fact that the child has been dying previously. What can be inferred from it is that there must be a reason for which the child has now refused to die. In Searle’s point of view, this name is assertive in nature; it is used to state a fact, which may turn out to be true or false, depending on *Abiku*’s response to it. His parents are only declaring by assumption. Thus, they give themselves some hope. It is suitable for both male and female *Abiku* children.

### ***Malomo***

*Malomo* means ‘Do not go again’. The *Abiku* child is told not to go back to the spirit world again. The locution is *Malomo*. The illocution is ‘imploring’. The speech act is a direct one because it is an instance of “imperative used to command”. It is note-worthy that the motive behind the imperative name is appeal-defined. The presupposition is that the child has been ‘going’ before. Its inference is that there must be a place to which the child ‘goes’. This is a directive speech act because it is used to give an order to the child. It is suitable for male and female *Abiku* children.

### ***Kuye***

This name denotes death is done away with. Death is often presented in the Yoruba culture as something that hovers round people’s heads. But here, it is said that death is dodged. The illocution therefore is “declaring”. The speech act is direct because, it is a case of “declarative used to affirm”. The presupposition is that death has stayed over the bearer in time past, but is

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avoided now. Its inference is that the child must be living now. It is an assertive speech act, from Searle's point of view because, death may come for *Abiku* with time. Hence a statement whose truth value is not known has been made. It is suitable for an *Abiku* male or female child.

### ***Remilekun***

Remilekun is a contraction of *Oluwaremilekun* which means God has put an end to my tears. The birth of another child is believed to be God's way of compensating *Abiku*'s parents for the loss suffered. The illocutionary act is thus announcing. The speech act is direct because it is an instance of 'declarative used to affirm'. The presupposition is that the speaker has been weeping before now. The inference is that the child must have been responsible in one way or the other, for the speaker's tears. It is also assertive in nature because, the speaker is stating a fact. It is commonly borne by *Abiku* female children.

Furthermore, the root of the name "olu" (the lord) is significant to this study. *Olu* or *Oluwa* presupposes that the namers and the bearer are Christians because it is used for the lord Jesus Christ among the Yoruba Christians. But we also have the traditional form of the name such as *Ogunremilekun* (the god of iron consoles me) and *Sangoremilekun* (the thunder god consoles me). This variety reveals the polytheistic nature of religion among the Yoruba.

### ***Abiyelomo***

*Abiyelomo* means that a child is born to live. The *Abiku* child is informed by the speaker that he or she is expected to live as other children do. *Abiku* is assumed to be convinced that the birth process is only gone through for the fun of it. He is therefore enlightened (through this name) that the essence of procreation is for the child to live. The illocution of this name is "informing". It is an indirect speech act because, it is an instance of "declarative used to command". The child is politely commanded to stay alive. He or she is being told stylishly to emulate other children that live.

Its presupposition is that there is an expectation of survival that is attached to the birth of a child. Its inference is that the child must have been ignorant of the fact that a child should live. It is an assertive speech act, used to commit the child to living. It is suitable for both *Abiku* female and male children.

### ***Ajitoni***

This name denotes 's/he wakes up today'. In this context, the *Abiku*'s parents are not sure if the child will "wake up" or survive tomorrow. The locution is *Ajitoni*. The illocution, therefore, is both asserting and hypothesizing. It is a direct speech act since it is a case of declarative used to affirm. The presupposition is that the child may not wake up the next day.

### ***Ayelaagbe***

*Ayelaagbe* as a locution denotes the world is a place meant to be stayed in. The illocutionary act of this name is advising because the *Abiku* is being counseled by his namers to prefer the (human) world to the great beyond (the abode of the dead and spirits). It is an indirect speech act because it is an instance of declarative used to command. The presupposition is that the addressee must have only been visiting.

### **Anwoo**

This *Abiku* name denotes “we are watching him/her”. The *Abiku* parents are conveying their disposition and action to this child by watching whether he will survive or not. The illocutionary act of the name is, therefore, hypothesizing. It is a direct speech act because it is a case of declarative used to affirm. The presupposition is that he or she may not live.

### **Durosinmi**

This name stems from a Yoruba saying *omo ko layole, eni omo sin l’o bi’mo* (a child does not worth rejoicing at, it is only an aged person who is survived and buried by his child that can be said to have had a child). From the foregoing, the *Abiku*’s parent thus decided to be pleading with his child to ‘wait to bury me’ as the name suggests; hence the illocutionary act, pleading. *Durosinmi* is a direct speech act because it is an occasion of an imperative used to command. The presupposition is that the speaker should die before the *Abiku* child.

### **Banjoko**

*Banjoko* by denotation is ‘sit down with me.’ The speech act of this name is partly pleading and partly commanding. If we transcribe the full potential of the name to mean ‘please, sit down with me’, we may come up with the assumption that the bearer’s parents are pleading. But if the meaning postulate is realized as ‘[You] should sit down with me’, then, the illocutionary act is commanding. For the purpose of the present study, we may adopt the latter which is a direct speech act because it is an imperative used to command.

## **7. Statistical Distribution and Summary**

From the analysis above, we may deduce that eleven illocutionary acts are deployed. These are imploring, announcing, hypothesizing, informing, declaring, condemning, asserting, pleading, advising and commanding. An attempt at frequency distribution of the acts reveals that informing has the highest number of occurrence with a frequency of three. Both imploring and declaring have two frequency distributions respectively while the remaining illocutionary acts have one frequency distribution each. This is demonstrated in Table 1 as follows:

**Table 1: A table illustrating frequency and illocutionary percentages of *Abiku* names**

Illocution	Frequency	Percentage
Informing	3	20
Imploring	2	13.3

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Declaring	2	13.3
Announcing	1	6.7
Hypothesizing	1	6.7
Condemning	1	6.7
Questioning	1	6.7
Asserting	1	6.7
Pleading	1	6.7
Advising	1	6.7
Commanding	1	6.7

The frequency breakdown is consequently followed by a percentage analysis which indicates (as expected) that informing has 30%, imploring and declaring have 13.3% each while others have 6.7% each. These are statistically transformed to a multiple bar chart (see Fig. 1) and a pie chart (Fig. 2) as follows.

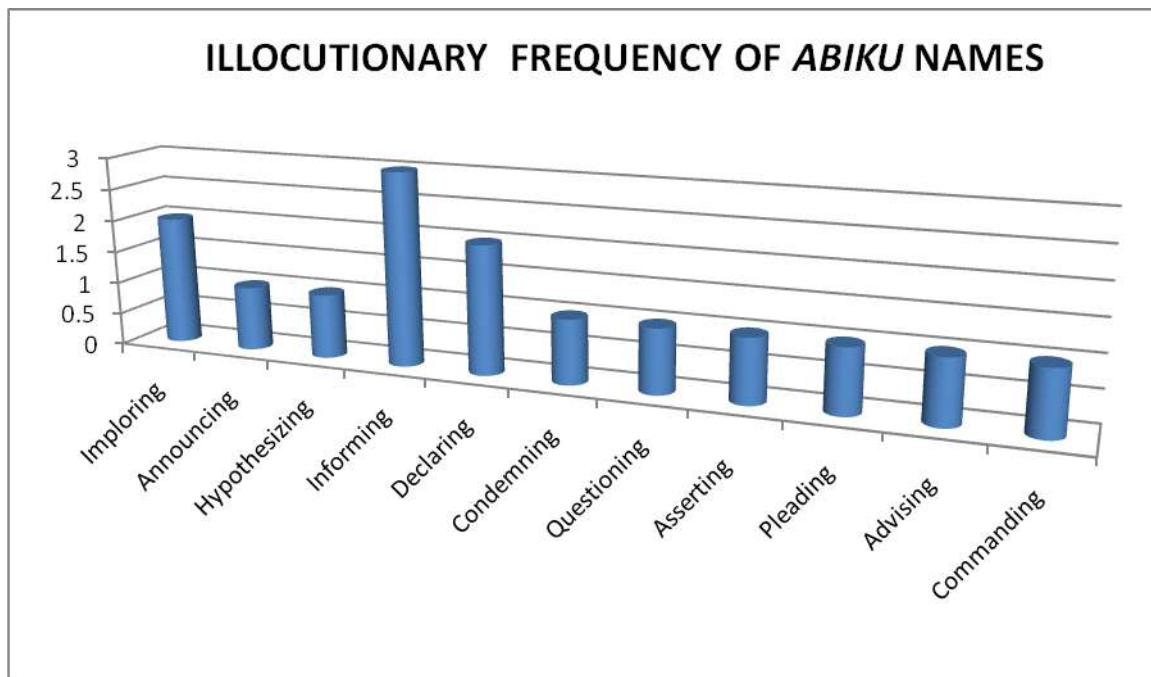


Fig. 1: A multiple bar chart showing the frequency distributions of the *Abiku* names studied

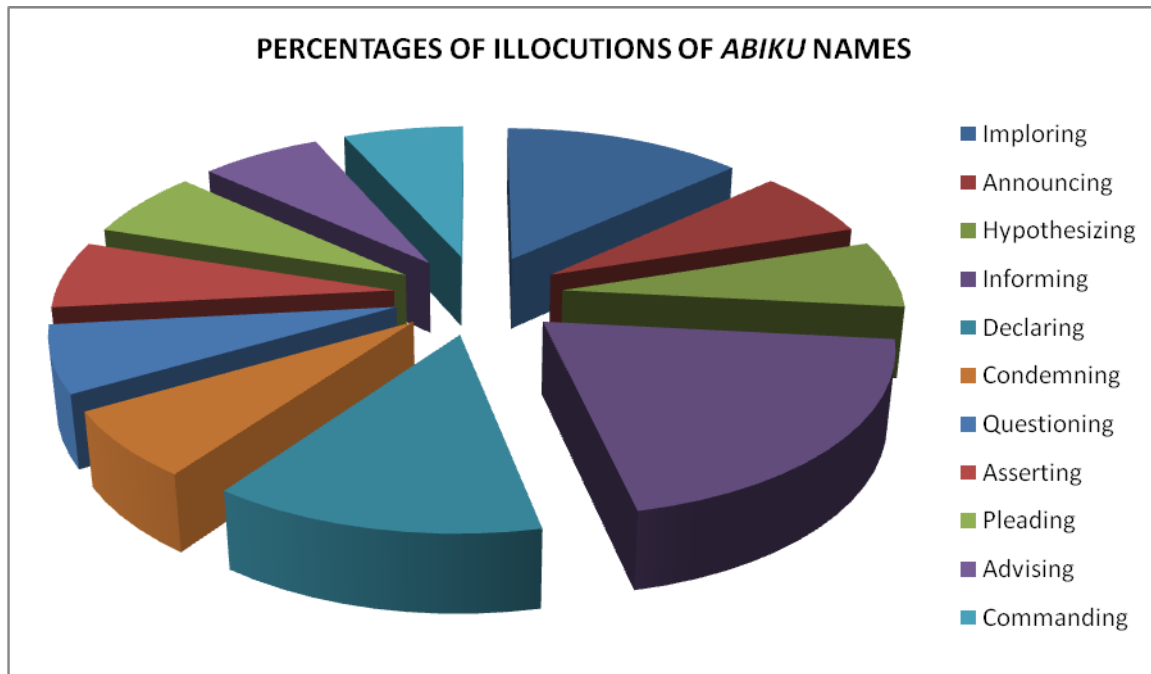


Fig. 2: A pie chart indicating percentages of illocutions of the *Abiku* names studied

## 8. Conclusion

From the foregoing, we may establish that names mean a lot in Africa; particularly, there is magic in *Abiku* names. The names are a potential source of historical, social and spiritual documentation. They are therapeutic in caging the *Abiku* child who is interested in ‘coming and going these several seasons’ (Clark, 1967:61). In conclusion, the study of *Abiku* names in Yorubaland is a significant one because unlike other names, *Abiku* names are ‘semogenic’ i.e. they are rich in meaning and have socio-pragmatic significance.

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