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## THE MORPHOLOGY, SEMANTICS AND SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF YORÙBÁ NAMES

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### Abstract

It is observed that all *orúkọ* 'attributive names', certain *orúkọ àbísọ* 'personal names' and *àlájé* 'nicknames' can be easily identified along gender distinction in Yorùbá (Ola-Orie 2002). In this paper, I show that the parameters for this identification are morphological, semantic and sociolinguistic phenomena rather than a sole affair of semantics as widely acclaimed in the literature. I establish that names which contain *baba* 'father', *akin* 'valour', *ogun* 'war', *jà* 'fight', *fẹ* 'like/love' are exclusively masculine and therefore given to male children whereas names that contain *iyá/yeye* 'mother', *ẹwà* 'beauty' the verbs *ké* 'adorn' and *bẹ* 'beg' are almost always feminine and given to female children. I claim that these morphological and semantic properties are due to the influence of societal norms on linguistics: it is shown that while Yorùbá assign physical activities such as waging war, wrestling and hunting to male members of the society; activities that involve caring, adoration and aesthetics are exclusively for females.

### 1. Introduction

Yorùbá, like any other African, Asian and several Oceanic Communities, take delight in giving names that shed light on various forms of socio-cultural information around the time that a child is born. It has also been observed, for

Africa in general and Yorùbá in particular, that one unique feature of Personal names is their elaborate linguistic structure, semantic complexity and reflection of African values (Goodenough 1965, Odùyoṣe 1972, Èkúndayò 1977, Akinaṣò 1980, Awóyalé 1982, Abíòdún 1996, Ajíbóyè 1996, Ògúnwálé 2002 and Ola-Orie 2002, 2009). In this paper, I examine the issue of gender in Yorùbá attributive names, personal names and nicknames and claim that while naming is purely a socio-religious affair among the Yorùbá, its sociolinguistic and semantic implication cannot be underplayed. In particular, I show that there are certain sociolinguistics factors that play vital roles in the names that male and female children bear. Some of these factors combine with morphology to fashion out their interpretation. Section 2 focuses on a review of Adéoyè's (1982) and Òla-Orie's (2002) classification of Yorùbá names, based on male-female distinction and residues of inherent gender distinction in Yorùbá. Section 3 presents the parameters to use in my proposed classification and the analysis that accounts for the selected Yorùbá names. I conclude in section 4.

## 2. A Review of Adéoyè's (1982) and Òla-Orie's (2002) classification of Yorùbá Personal Names (YPN)

This section makes a review of two of the previous works that relate to my present study. First to be reviewed is one of the first works on Yorùbá names in Yorùbá studies namely, Adéoyè (1982). This is followed by the more recent work of Òla-Orie (2002). The two put together give us a deep knowledge of what scholars have claimed for the aspects of Yorùbá names under consideration and what remains to be

covered.

### 2.1 A Review of Adéoyè's (1982) work

Adéoyè's (1982) inspiring work looks at Yorùbá names under *orúkò àmútorumwá* 'a name which a child is born with', *orúkò àbísò* 'name that refers to the circumstances prevailing at the time of the birth', *àbíki* 'born to die again child', *orúkò oríkí* 'attributive names', *àlájé* 'nicknames' and *àdápè* 'avoidance-name'. The aspect that catches our attention is the classification of *àbísò* names into male and female groups. One observation with Adéoyè's presentation is the problem of the parameters used for his classification. Second is the problem of a perfect division or distinction between the names he classifies as being ~~borne by males and females~~ respectively. Adéoyè (1982) begins with a brief introduction of what *àbísò* names are. He identifies five different types of *àbísò* names which:

- (i) reflect on current events in the child's family at birth
- (ii) focus on the child itself
- (iii) show that the child's parents are both wealthy and equally entitled to certain chieftaincy titles
- (iv) are a reflection of the family's occupation
- (v) depict the religion of the family.

What I present in table 1 is a summary of Adéoyè's classification. I retain the ordering in the work as much as possible.

Table 1

	Male	Female	Neuter
i	<b>Kúmólú</b> death-take-astute	<b>Oniképé</b> owner-(of)- adoration-complete	<b>Omótánhàjé</b> child-finish- malice
	<b>Ọtégbèyẹ</b> intrigue-takes- honour	<b>Fóláwiyọ</b> use-wealth-wasł- hand	<b>Ìbidápọ</b> lineage-mix- together
ii	<b>Onípédé</b> one-that-takes-an- appeal-arrive	<b>Moréniké</b> <i>I-see-person-to- adore</i>	<b>Ayódélé</b> joy-reach-home
	<b>Akínyélé</b> valour-fits-house	<b>Omótáyo</b> child-is-enough- for-joy	<b>Şıyanbólá</b> march-meet- wealth
iii	<b>Adérọgbà</b> crown-surrounds	<b>Adédọjà</b> crown-turns-to- market	<b>Adéwùmi</b> crown-pleases- me
	<b>Adéyẹmí</b> crown-fits-me	<b>Fadérera</b> use-crown-to-play- the-lady-of-version	<b>Bádẹjókó</b> sit-with-crown
iv	<b>Odébùnmi</b> hunting-gives-me	<b>Odéfínké</b> hunting-gives-me- to-adore	-
	<b>Ọgúnńıyı</b> Ọgún-has-prestige	<b>Mosádogun</b> <i>I-run-hold-to war</i>	-
	<b>Onàbànjo</b> art work-resembles- me	<b>Onàwùmi</b> Art work-pleases me	-

v	Fádẹyi	Fáyinká	
	Ifá-turns to-this	Ifá-surrounds-me	-
	Şàngódẹyi	Şàngódàrà	-
	Şàngó-turns to-this	Şàngó-makes-wonder	-
	Şovinká	Efunsetan	-
	Oşó-surrounds me	Efun-does -(it)-finish	-
	Ọjẹwùmi	Ọjẹbùnmi	-
	Ọjẹ-pleases-me	Ọjẹ-gives-me	-
	Orówólé	Oróyẹmı	-
	Oró-enters-house	Oró-fits-me	-
	Ọşúndinà	Ọşúnkúnbi	-
	Ọşun-blocks-way	Ọşun-fill-family	-

(Adapted from Adéoyè 1982)

A careful study of table 1 shows some inconsistency in the parameters used in Adéoyè's classification along male-female distinction. Two sets of examples to support this observation may suffice. First, consider names with the morpheme *bùnmi* 'give me': *Odébùnmi* 'hunting gives me' and *Ọjẹbùnmi* 'Ọjẹ gives me'. While the former is ascribed to a male child, the latter is said to be exclusively for a female child. As to the preceding morpheme, at best, both can go with a male identity. Indeed both *Odẹ* and *Ọjẹ* are professions that are carried out by males. Next, let us look at the pair of names: *Ọjẹwùmi* 'Ọjẹ-pleases-me' and *Onàwùmi* 'art work-pleases me'. Both also have in common the phrase: *wùmi* 'please me'. According to Adéoyè, *Onàwùmi* is meant for a female child only while *Ọjẹwùmi* is for a male child only. What one expects and which will have been established is for the suffix *bùnmi* to be for male children only, while *wùmi* goes for female children only, or vice versa. However,

this is not the case and there is no explanation for this.

The same problem is also observed in names Adéoyè describes as neutral, i.e. those that can be borne by either sex. For example, *wùmi* as a phrase can combine with *Adé* to give us *Adéwùmi*, which he classifies as neutral. Note that the same morpheme has been used in combination with other morphemes to produce male and female children respectively. There is no explanation for this inconsistency.

Talking about *oriki* 'attributive names', Adéoyè (1982:41) asserts that male *oriki* usually depicts 'bravery' whereas female *oriki* usually shows love, expectation and compassion (cf. Ola-Orie 2002). However, from our observation, there is no evidence that this claim is reflected in his grouping. The *oriki* names in (1) are for male while those in (2) are for female.

- |     |   |         |                                   |
|-----|---|---------|-----------------------------------|
| (1) | a | Àjà(w)ó | 'The one we fight and fall'       |
|     | b | Àmò(w)ó | 'The one we know and fall'        |
|     | c | Àjàní   | 'The one we fight for to possess' |
|     | d | Àsámú   | 'The one we select to take'       |
| (2) | a | Òdéré   | 'A kind of bird'                  |
|     | b | Àwèró   | 'The one we bath and adorn'       |
|     | c | Àsáké   | 'The one we select and pamper'    |

There seems to be nothing in the *oriki* names in (1) that hinges on 'bravery', though one may claim that the *oriki* names in (1a) and (1c) which contain the verb *já* 'fight' can only be borne by males from the socio-cultural perspective. This claim falls within the assumption that the Yorùbá society ascribes any activity that involves physical exercise to male people only. Another piece of evidence along this line of thought is *ijàkadi* 'wrestling' which in Yorùbá land is a game

that is exclusively carried out by males. Nevertheless, such argument does not hold for (1b) and (1d) as there is nothing in *mò* 'knowing' and *sà* 'selecting' that reflects masculinity. Similarly none of the three female *oriki* names in (2) reflects love, expectation or compassion.

## 2.2 A review of Ola-Orie's (2002) analysis of Yorùbá attributive names.

Using phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic parameters Ola Orie (2002) accounts for Yorùbá attributive names. As to its phonology Ola Orie claims that while attributive names with LLH pattern goes for either male or female names (3a,b) the LHH pattern (3c) is exclusively for female names. L stands for 'Low' and H stands for 'High'.

(3)	a.i	À-jà-di	LLH
		PREF-fight-restore	
	a.ii	Àkànni	LLH
		PREF-reach-have	
	b.i	À-wè-ró	LLH
		PREF-bathe-adorn (beautifully)	
	b.ii	À-bè-ní	LLH
		PREF-beg-have	
	c.i	À-bá-ké	LHH
		PREF-join-pamper	
	c.ii	À-ní-ké	LHH
		PREF-have-pamper	

The LLH is considered unmarked hence its wide coverage of both male and female attributive names. On the other hand the LHH tone pattern is marked, hence its narrow coverage of female attributive names only. On their morphology, Ola-Orie (2002) rightly observes that attributive



names like many other nominals are derived through prefixation. The prefix *à* is attached to a verb phrase composed of a sequence of two monosyllabic verbs. On their syntax, Ola-Orie also notes correctly that there is restriction in the kind of verb phrase (VP) that can take the prefix *à* morpheme to derive an attributive name. In particular, the VP must consist of two verbs that have no object. Finally, on their semantics, Orie observes correctly that the semantics of the co-occurring verbs is restricted. The core of her semantic classification is summarized below:

The first verb in a masculine name is a performative verb denoting notions such as bravery, decisiveness, unique emergence, and praise; the second verb, which is resultative in nature, denotes possession. On the other hand, verbs denoting nurturing, tenderness, adoration, praise, and beauty are chosen in creating feminine names (Ola-Orie 2002: 123)

Some examples that back up the content of the excerpt from Ola-Orie's work are given in (4).

(4)

Verb 1	Verb 2
<i>Masculine</i>	
<b>Bravery:</b> <i>jà</i> 'fight'	Resultative: <i>ní</i> 'to possess'
<b>Decisiveness:</b> <i>kàn</i> 'meet intentionally'	Resultative: <i>gbé</i> 'to carry'
<b>Purposely:</b> <i>yàn</i> 'choose'	Resultative: <i>mú</i> 'take'

#### *Feminine*

<b>Nurturing:</b>	<i>ké</i>	'pamper'
<b>Tenderness</b>	<i>bè</i>	'beg'
<b>Beautifying</b>	<i>wè</i>	'bathe'

It is observed that while masculine names have full attention in terms of their verbal composition, the same cannot be said of the feminine names. I guess this is because the verbs that combine to derive female attributive names are not as unique as those that combine to derive masculine names. This is the area that requires more than semantic criterion. In this paper I intend to extend Ola-Orie's analysis of attributive names along gender distinction to other names such as *orúkò àbísò* 'personal names' and *àlùjé* 'nicknames', combining semantics and sociological factors. But before then, I want to digress to point out that despite the claim that Yorùbá does not exhibit gender distinction in its grammar, it appears this is only true when we look at it from overt morphology. It is evident that there is non-feature induced gender distinction in the language. This is the focus of section 2.3.

### 2.3 Covert gender distinction

Apart from human names, there are other words that are gender related which have not been documented. I refer to them as covert gender names. They are names that are inherently ascribed to either a male or a female object. The data below show that Yorùbá indeed has residues of gender inclined distinction and goes on to suggest that in the distant past, the language might have gotten a more elaborate gender distinction than we have today. The data cut across general, human, animal, object and professional names.

(5)	Masculine	Feminine
a.	general	
	akò	abo
	'male'	'female'
b.	human	
	òkò	aya/iyàwó
	'husband'	'wife'
	bàbá	iyá
	'father'	'mother'
	òkúnrin	obinrin
	'man'	'woman'
	dáwòdù	béèrè
	'first male child'	'first female child'
c.	animals	
	àkùkò	obidiè/agbèbò
	'cock'	'chick'
	àgbò	agùtàn
	'ram'	'sheep'
	òbùkò	idèrègbè
	'he goat'	'she goat'
d.	objects	
	filà	gèlè
	'cap'	'head gear'
	şòkòtò	irò
	'pair of trousers'	'female wrapper'
	şòkòtò	yèrì/tòbì
	'pair of trousers'	'women apron'
e.	profession	
	onigbàjámò	onídìrì

'barber'

'hair dresser'

Today, some of the above distinctions are being neutralized. For example *şòkòtò*, *agbàdà*, and *yèrì/yèrì* 'ear ring' are being worn by both males and females. Similarly, there is no longer a sharp distinction between the professionals; *onídìrì* and *onigbàjámò* as a man can plait hair just as we have female barbers. I move to the overt gender marking, which is the focus of this paper.

### 3. Overt gender marking

Mario and Gaynu (1969) define gender as 'a grammatical distinction or classification of words, found chiefly in the Indo-European and Semitic languages' (p. 8). A language that displays this feature usually distinguishes a masculine and a feminine gender. In some cases, a neuter gender class emerges. According to Mario and Gaynu (1969), there are even languages that operate gender distinction according to whether the name depicts an animate or inanimate object. Further, there are languages that exhibit grammatical gender. Hausa and Kinyarwanda are two of such languages. In the latter, there are certain nominalizing morphemes, which are productive in deriving nouns and capable of showing gender distinction. For example, in Kinyarwanda, names that are formed with *nyira-*, *mukaa-*, are feminine while those formed with *nya-*, *munya-*, *see-*, and *ki-* are masculine.

It is a known fact that Yorùbá does not exhibit grammatical marking of genders as observed in some other languages, thus the grammatical gender feature is not inherent in its grammar (Awóbùlúyì 1978, Bámbòşé 1966, 1967). However, Adéoyè (1982) and Ola Orié (2002, 2009) show that there is an aspect of Yorùbá culture that reveals gender

distinction. This is in the aspect of naming. The problems relating to Adeoye and Ola Orié call for alternative parameters for classification along the same male-female distinction. In the section that follows, I present the parameters on which my classification is based. I show that Yorùbá gender features which are related to names are coded in certain morphemes whose semantics is driven partly by certain societal norms.

#### Parameter 1

All names that have *baba* 'father', *ogun* 'war', *akin* 'valour' and *fẹ* 'love' morphemes are for a male person.

#### Parameter 2

All names that have *iyá* 'mother', *kẹ* 'adorn', *ewà* 'beauty' and *bẹ* 'beg/entreated' morphemes are for a female person.

In section 3, I shall offer explanation for the choice of these parameters and analyze how they work in Yorùbá names with ample examples.

In any human race, it is not uncommon to witness segregation among male and female members. Such can be natural or artificial. It can also cut across religious, political or social factors. Differences between male and female can even be psychological or political. Among the Jews and Arabs, women are not given political function. In Nigeria, aspiring to a political position by women is very recent. In Yorùbá, many decisions in the family are taken by the head of the family who is usually the husband (a man). The Bible describes wives as weaker partners thus they are regarded as a delicate object (I Peters 3:7). The next section takes a look at some of the sociological factors that explain personal names along male-female distinction.

Among the Yorùbá, there is a division of labour between male and female members of the family. While acknowledging that 'there was no actual prohibition of women from hoeing and planting...' Fádipé (1970) maintains that 'the Yorùbá as a whole did not make use of the labour of women on their farms' (p.47). This claim is an indication that there is a distinction between male and female members in terms of occupation. On the type of a job a wife can do, Fádipé (1970) notes further:

The wife is responsible for seeking either in an elaborately processed form or practically as harvested, some of the products of the farm that are in excess of the normal requirement of the farmer and his family (pp. 148-149).

Going further on the kind of duty a woman performs, he asserts that: 'It is of course a woman's duty to cook for her husband and to keep the house.' (p. 149). All these put together imply that the job of a female member of the family consists of light assignments to be carried out mostly at home or in the market. The male on the other hand exclusively does all tedious jobs at home (including building and repairing the house, fitting wooden handles to knives or axes, etc.), and on the farm. Such works include cultivation of farmland for planting various crops, and climbing of palm tree either to harvest palm fruits or tap palm wine etc. In essence, it is the responsibility of a man to provide shelter for the family and to supply the entire household with food (see Fádipé 1970, p. 150). The discussion above as I present shortly has indirectly dealt with some aspects of the features to be considered under masculine names.

### 3.1 Male names and their masculine features

This section presents some parameters that I use in the

classification and analysis of the categories of the names under review into male-bound and female-bound distinction. There are four morphemic features under the parameters for masculine names. The four are [baba], [akin], [ogun] and [fẹ]. I examine them in turns.

### 3.1.1 [baba] as a masculine feature:

The first to be considered as a feature/morpheme which can combine with other morpheme(s) to form names that a male person bears is *baba* 'father'. Though, *baba* on its own is a name, it can serve as a prefix morpheme to derive some other human names. Whenever it does so, the derived name can only refer to a male person. Some examples are given below.

- (6)
- |                     |                                 |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Babá-túndé</b>   | 'father has come again'         |
| <b>Babá-jidé</b>    | 'father arrived early'          |
| <b>Babá-rindé</b>   | 'father walk arrive'            |
| <b>Babá-rimisá</b>  | 'father saw me and ran away'    |
| <b>Baba-lólá</b>    | 'father is the honour/wealth'   |
| <b>Babá-ládé</b>    | 'father on return becomes rich' |
| <b>Baba-láwo</b>    | 'A priest of Ifa'               |
| <b>Baba-misinkú</b> | 'the head of a funeral rite'    |

There is no part of Yorùbá land, to the best of this researcher's knowledge, where any of the above names refers to a female person, except where it serves as the person's surname. Most of the names under review reflect the belief of the Yorùbá that a dead person can still come back to the house the second time in the same form, sex inclusive. Thus, when reincarnation takes place, one expects an old man that died to reincarnate as a male child and never as a female.

### 3.1.2 [akin] as a masculine feature:

The feature/morpheme *akin* seems to be unique among the Yorùbá. It signifies 'valour'. It is highly significant for someone to be addressed as a brave man. A person that is qualified to have names with this morpheme is either a famous hunter or a warrior or a male child born to the house of a powerful man. The Yorùbá at naming ceremony give names that have [akin] morpheme.

- (7)
- |                    |                                            |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <b>Akín-yélé</b>   | 'Akin befits home'                         |
| <b>Akín-wùmi</b>   | 'Akin pleases me'                          |
| <b>Akin-labí</b>   | 'It is Akin (child) that we gave birth to' |
| <b>Akín-jidé</b>   | 'Akin came at dawn'                        |
| <b>Akín-délé</b>   | 'Akin arrived home'                        |
| <b>Akín-tólá</b>   | 'Akin is enough honour'                    |
| <b>Akín-kùúgbé</b> | 'Akin did not die in vain'                 |
| <b>Akín-kúnlé</b>  | 'Akin fill the house'                      |
| <b>Akín-wáare</b>  | 'Akin comes well'                          |
| <b>Akín-bòwálé</b> | 'Akin returned home'                       |

The claim that only reputable hunters or men of valour can take a name that has *akin* as an affix implies that to a large extent such names can be hereditary. Indeed, it will be a mockery for an indolent person, a hunter who has not killed one of the wild animals in the forest or a warrior who has not brought honour from the warfront to name his child *Akínkúnmi* or *Akintúndé*. Further, whenever *akin* is prefixed to a verb phrase to derive a name, the name can depict a number of things. *Akínyélé* thus can be an expression of the father in the male child in order to show his satisfaction in being brave. *Akínwùmi*, when given to a child at the naming ceremony is a reflection of the parent's joy that he is a man of valour. And

*Akinlabi* is a reflection of the parent's wish that his son be as brave as he (the father) is when he becomes of age.

Since no woman takes to hunting, no woman goes to war. As it is the practice among the Bantu, so it is in the Yorùbá; in most cases it is the father who gives names to children that are born to a family. In such common case, neither the giver nor the bearer of a name that has *akin* as affix can be a female person.

### 3.1.3 [ogun] as a masculine feature:

Closely related to the feature/morpheme [*akin*] is the feature/morpheme [*ogun*] 'war' which is found in certain Yorùbá names. The warriors constitute a distinguished class in the Yorùbá land. Thus, as earlier mentioned, they are men of valour. Among the *Ọ̀yọ́*, they are the *Ẹ̀sọ́* whereas among the Èkítì, they are the *olóógún* 'warrior'. One way which these people are identified is through their names. Most names that are formed through the affixation of *ogun* are not given at birth. The only exception to this claim is *Abídogun* 'born before a departure to a war front'. In most cases, they are titles given to outstanding warrior.

(8)

Balógún	'father in war'
Arógundádé	'the one that put on a crown when he sees war'
Arógunyọ	'the one that rejoice when there is war'
Badà	'king of warrior'
Jagun	'warrior'
Jagunmólú	'The one that wages war and is victorious'
Bógunjókò	'The one that sit with war'

Jagunlabi	'It is a warrior that we give birth to'
Abógunlòkò	'The one that meets war on the farm (and fight fearlessly)'
Ogunlólá	'War is wealth'
Ajagungbadé	'The one that fight war to receive crown'

Apart from those names that have *ogun* in their composition, there are yet others that are given to warriors as title. They include *Ààrẹ́ Ọ̀nàkakanfọ́*, *Àrẹ́ Onibon* and *Basòrun*. Even though none of the last set of names has *ogun* affixed to the remaining morpheme(s) in their derivation, the meaning conveyed by each of them has reference to a warrior. Again, since warriors are usually men, it implies that such names can only be borne by a male person.

### 3.1.4 [fẹ] as a masculine feature/morpheme in Yorùbá male names

A dictionary of the Yorùbá language defines *fẹ* as 'to be willing, like, love, want, desire, woo, approve' (p. 83). This definition of *fẹ* has a range of meanings and consequently a wide scope of application. Two of the meanings namely like and love, have direct relevance to our discussion in this section. The morpheme *fẹ*, when affixed to some other morpheme(s) to derive names, such names have been observed to be exclusively referring to a male child. In Yorùbá society as it is in most parts of the world, it is the male that proposes to his female counterpart when falling in love. This view is expressed in Ifá corpus as contained in Akinwoso's *Ogbè wá tẹ́*.

Ogbè wá tẹ́ kára kó rọ́ wọ́n

Á díá fún Yemowó, tí í ẹ́ aya Ọ̀bátálá