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A Pragmalinguistic Study of Yoruba Personal Names

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BY VIRTUE OF THEIR MORPHOLOGY and pragmatic effects, name-forms are lexical. However, proverbs are usually copious linguistic expressions that transcend mere lexical units. This study gives a description and analysis of the forms and contents of certain proverbial expressions whose linguistic forms and discursive roles have permitted their usage as Yorùbá personal names. Two major tasks are crucial in the following analysis: a characterization of the process involved in the change, and the explication of the interface between the pragmatics and semantic contents of this class of names. Essentially, therefore, the paper pursues answers to the following questions: how are the sentential features of Yorùbá proverbs reduced to the morphological/lexical status of names and why are some proverbs usable as names and a wide range of others not attested? And, arising from those two questions, what is the status and what are utilitarian effects of this class of names in pre-literate Yorùbá society? It is hoped that the provision of answers to the above questions would suggest reasons why certain rules; i.e. construction of certain types, occur in certain communication situations and thus highlight the interface between construction types and their uses.

1. Introduction

In an earlier study¹, an attempt was made to demonstrate that Yorùbá name-forms could be generated from two basic syntactic rules as given in [1].

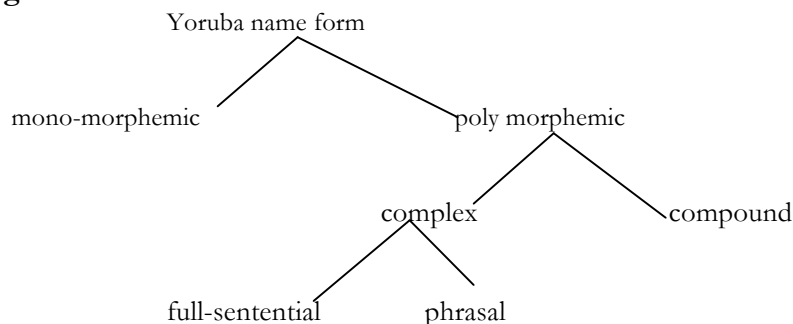
- [1] (a) Nominal --> Name
(b) Sentence --> Name

The above paradigm can be illustrated by [2]

- [2] (a) (i) Òjọ - name of a male child born with part of the umbilical cord wound round his neck.
(ii) Àjàyí - name of a child born with face turned downwards.
(iii) Èkó - a place/personal name. This is another name for Lagos.
(b) (i) Oyèèsòro - the contest for the chieftaincy title was (could be) difficult
(ii) Odétúndé - the hunter god has come into the family again
(iii) Tinúolá - the inner side of affluence
(iv) Akin-olá - hero of affluence

[2] amply suggests that the morphological structures of Yorùbá names can be broadly reduced to mono-morphemic and poly-morphemic types. I further observe that the poly-morphemic name-forms (as in 2b) can be further sub-divided into complex; under which we have on the one hand, full sentential (cf 2b(i) and 2b(ii)) and phrasal (cf 2b(iii)) name-forms. And on the other, compound names (cf 2b(iv)). The foregoing description is depicted in figure [A] below:

Figure A



As has been shown in the data presented in section [2], this study is concerned with the complex name-forms that subsume full-sentential and phrasal forms. This claim, in part, agrees with Obieng (2001:114) that:

Structurally, African names range from single words, phrases, and sentences [...]

The present study, therefore, is concerned with the explication of the following corpus of names.

2. **Data Base:** The highlighted words are the extracted names (from the whole proverbial expression). They are so highlighted to distinguish them from the entire proverbs as given below:

- (1) **Bàòkú** (ìse ò tán, olúwa ní í gbé orí eni ga)
Gloss: While still alive, hope is not completely lost because God is a great elevator.
- (2) **Àńjońrìn** (a ò morí olówó, kò sí eni tó morí olóyè lówùjò)
Gloss: Though we are playmates, it is difficult to identify who is destined to be eventually made chief/prosperous among us.
- (3) **Bolódeòkú** (òde rè kí hu gbégi)
Gloss: While the owner of a premise is still alive, his park cannot be overgrown with weeds.
- (4) **Àtidádé** (kinniún kò sèyìn olódùmarè)
Gloss: The monarchial status of lion among the animals is not without the authority of God.
- (5) **Apálará** (ìgún pá ni iyekan)
Gloss: Your diligence at work is your kinsman while your elbow (how hard you work) is your relation.
- (6) **Ayélojà** (òrun ni ilé)
Gloss: The world is a mere market place while heaven is the eternal home.
- (7) **Àjùmòbí** (kò kan tí àánú, eni olúwa bá rán sí ni, ní se ni lóore)
Gloss: Being benevolent has nothing to do with family ties; goodness can only come from any God-sent person.
- (8) **Àdábánijà** (eni ijà ò bá ní pe ara rè lókùnrin)
Gloss: One's stuff can only be determined in the face of difficulty i.e. only those who are not faced with hard times could brag of being invisible.
- (9) **Awòlúmátèé** (ìwòn ara rè, ló mò)
Gloss: A stranger who would not loose his credibility must know his bounds.
- (10) **Àkéjù** (ní ba omo olówó jé)
Gloss: It is sheer over-pampering that spoils the lives of children from rich homes.
- (11) **Abánigbé** (ni à á mo ìse eni. Èyàn gbókèrè níyì)
Gloss: It is only when you move closer to someone that you know much about his real worth. A distant person is rather viewed as deserving respect.

- (12) **Àbànikán-ń-dá**, ikán kò le mú òkúta)
 Gloss: Termites are merely contemplating; they dare not gnaw at stones.
- (13) **Bánúso** (má bá ènìyàn so. Ènìyàn ò sí mó ayé dèké)
 Gloss: Keep secrets to yourself alone. Don't ever confide in anybody. No one is truly trustworthy.
- (14) **Omólàyòlé** (eni omo sín ló bímo)
 Gloss: Never flaunt having children in your prime age until those children live to bury you at your old age.
- (15) **Bínúyo** (obì a máa yàn)
 Gloss: If there are no grudges among the cult-members, success is bound to be recorded.
- (16) **Bólántà** (a wù wón, bóla bá dojúdé tán, olá a máa sú ni. Àkèyìnsí olá kǐ rò)
 Gloss: It is attractively soothing when the position of honour is flourishing. But it becomes disgusting when it turns sour.
- (17) **Agbójúlógún** (fí ara rè fún òsì ta)
 Gloss: One who relies on inheritance would turn a pauper.
- (18) **Tanímòla** kò sí àyàfí Olórun oba.
 Gloss: (No one knows tomorrow except God)
- (19) **Abèrùàgbà** (ni yóò te ilè yǐ pé)
 Gloss: One who fears the elders would live long.
- (20) **Ológbón** (kan kò ta kókó omi mó etí aso, òmòrán kan ko mo iye iyèpè ilè)
 Gloss: No wise man can tie the water into knots, as there is no intelligence that could count the number of sounds.
- (21) **Kòsálábààrò** (bí kò se orí eni).
 Gloss: There is no confidant besides one's destiny.

3. The Yoruba Naming System and Practice

Ubahakwe (1981:108) gave a typology of African names as: **given**, **ascribed** and **pet**. The category of names construed as given in Yorùbá context are **orúko** (real names), **oríkì àbíso** (cognomens) and **oríkì àlàjé** (nick names, from the lineage) which are given a child at birth following certain sociological considerations. These are given in order to effectively serve as veritable pragmatic resources for identifying and categorising individuals. The ascribed names are selected by or applied to individuals based on character, physical appearance, profession, mannerisms or achievements. The implication is that such names are not given at birth until much later in life. Pet names, on the other hand, are names given to the **àbíkús** (born-to-die), the essence of which is to appeal to them in order to be compassionate and see the reasons why they should stay to enjoy life with their parents. Some female oríkì can also suggest petting due to the semantic contents of the verb used in the prefix + verb construction of the Yorùbá female oríkì (cf. Olá 2002). Egblewogbe, quoted by Yusuf (2006), on the socio-semantic relevance of proverbs, cannot be ignored, that proverbs “are a distillation of the wisdom of the people derived over the ages from a careful observation of everyday experiences involving human beings, nature and animals as well as natural phenomena and social events”. Careful understanding of proverbs, therefore, can make us understand more carefully our humanity because they are grounded in our social experience.

The sorts of names involved in this study, however, are the ascribed names. Initially, they are nicknames (synthetic) because they follow no “Home Condition”² consideration, in contrast to given names. Although it is fashionable, it is not compulsory for an individual to have ascribed name all his life.

As it will become obvious later, social parlances, traditional aphorisms, and the Yoruba

general worldview are also sometimes abstracted to construct this category of proverbial names. However, not all Yoruba proverbs can be used as names. It is, therefore, appropriate to describe the syntactic and semantic features which favor those proverbs that are abridged and used as names. In this vein, let us examine Bamgbose (1968:75).

4. Bamgbose (1968:75):

In spite of a wealth of research on Yoruba proverbs³, one can only point to Bamgbose (1968:75) on the grammatical analysis of the structural forms of Yorùbá proverbs. He identifies four main sentence patterns that pervade the lexical features of Yoruba proverbs thus:

- (a) simple sentence,
- (b) complex sentence,
- (c) sequential sentence, and
- (d) parallel sentence. He goes further to illustrate with the following examples:

[A] Simple sentence

- 16(a) *A kii finá sórí òrúlé sùn*
(one doesn't go to bed while the roof is on fire)
- (b) *Ara líle loògùn orò*
(Sound health is the medicine for wealth.)
- (c) *Ogbó kò lóògùn*
(Old age has no remedy)

He observes that they are either a clause with negative habitual tense marker **ki í**, with first person plural pronoun **a** as subject, or a clause having the particle **ni** (or **I** before oral vowels), between two nouns or clauses which have a noun subject and sometimes a noun object as well.

[B] Complex Sentence

These are sentences that have a **bi** clause or a nominal clause as dependent clauses. Others are those with dependent clause which is a nominal phrase and which must show agreement in number concord with a pronoun in the following free clause.

- 17(a) *Bí igi bá wó lu igi, tókè rẹ̀ là á kóókó gbé*
(If trees fall on trees, the topmost should be removed first.)
- (b) *Àgbà tó rẹ̀jò tí kò sá, ara ikú ló n yá a*
(An adult that sees a snake and does not run, he is courting death.)

[C] Sequential Sentence

Sequential sentences consist of two or more sentences juxtaposed with a grammatical, lexical or lexico-grammatical reference between the sentences. Such reference may take the form of:

- (a) a pronoun taking up a noun in the preceding sentence or a repetition of one or more lexical items in the preceding sentence. For example:
 - (i) *ìgbín n ràjò, ó filé rẹ̀ serù.* (The snail goes on a journey and takes its house with it).
 - (ii) *Oní la mò, a ò mòla.* (It is today that we know, we are oblivious of tomorrow). The lexical reference consists of either (a) a repetition of one or more lexical items in the preceding sentence e.g. (i) *A ò tètè ké olè, olè n ké mó olóko.* (We did not accuse the thief in time, (but) the thief accused the owner of the farm). (b) a contrast between one or more lexical items in one sentence and other lexical items in the preceding sentence: (i) *Eni àìgbón pa ló pò; eni ogbón pa kò tó nn kan.* (Those killed by folly are many;

(but) those killed by wisdom are few).

- (b) the lexico-grammatical reference involves the repetition of a structure and some lexical items similar to those of the preceding sentence. The effect of this repetition is to divide the proverb into two or more parts each of which echoes the end of the preceding part e.g. *Gèlè ò dùn bí kà mò ón wé...* (The head tie is not elegant unless one knows how to tie it well; Tying it well is not as important as making it suit one.)

[D] Parallel Sentences

A number of sentences are juxtaposed so that there would be a similarity in their structure and a contrast between two or more lexical items.

- (i) *Sòkòtò níi jogún idí*
Omo níi jogún baba
 (The trousers inherit the waist
 The son succeeds the father)
- (ii) *Èmí àbàtá níi mú odò sán*
Olá baba níi mú omo yan
 (The force of the mountain makes the river flow
 The honor of the father makes the child saunter with confidence)

From the short descriptions of each sentence type, it will be noted that apart from the simple sentence type, all the other categories illustrated in Bamgbose (1968) are structurally complex. One pervading feature of this complex set of proverbs is that they all exhibit “pragmatic pauses” immediately after their thematic elements, which are fore-grounded. These pragmatic pauses, sometimes represented orthographically by commas, usually demarcate where the name-form could be carved. Besides, simple sentences do not participate in the construction because the information contained in them is too scanty to be abstracted from the process of fabrication of Yoruba proverbial names. And perhaps that explains the reason why the simple sentences pattern does not participate in the name form fabrication of Yoruba proverbial names (YPN). We shall leave a more comprehensive discussion of other reasons why this is particularly so far our theoretical framework to handle.

5. YPN as the Extracted Conceptual Representation

It will be observed that following “length restriction principles” of Ekundayo (1977:56), the names from the whole range of proverbial expressions are the extracted conceptual representations that form thematic elements and core-meanings of the corpus of proverbs used as names. Besides, these extracted tokens are fore-grounded and situated at the thematic positions of the proverbs. This information packaging device is of great significance to the extraction of names. For example, see our corpus number [7] repeated as [21] for convenience:

[21] **Àjùmòbí**, kò kan ti àánú, ení olúwa rán sí ni ní se ni lóore

Gloss: Being benevolent has nothing to do with family ties; goodness can only come from any God-sent person.

This can as well be re-structured as:

[22] Eni Olúwa bá rán sí ni ní se ni lóoré nítorí pé àjùmòbí kò kan tàánú

Gloss: It is the God-sent person who can be benevolent to someone because kinship ties are immaterial.

But the latter “loose structure” (which although is the paraphrase of the former) would be difficult to be coded as names since the core meaning is stranded (hidden) somewhere within the expression; not fronted like [21] and all others, as presented in our data. Moreover, only the simple declarative sentences participate in the sentence typology of proverbial names. Where we have seemingly interrogative sentences, they are mere rhetorical ones⁴.

One major task involved in the process of extraction of conceptual representation is the

identification of the tokens that constitute the topic of the proverb. In discourse semantics, according to Dijk (1997:62), there are three basic ideas of what constitutes a topic:

- (a) the theme is what the sentence is about
- (b) the theme is the starting point of the sentence. We tend to give prominence to a token by placing it at the beginning of sentences.
- (c) the theme is the centre of attention for the sentence.

Following the above identification strategy of the theme topic as highlighted above, the next task is to subject this core meaning of the proverb to lexicalization. The process involved in the lexicalization, according to Talmy (1985:59) may involve deletion or erasure of the word-boundary to make the form turn into a lexical form. This will enable the token to become pithy and conform to the length restriction principle opined by Ekundayo (1977:56). A proverb whose core meanings cannot be so extracted, be focused and be lexicalized, as in the cases of simple and parallel sentences, cannot be a candidate for YPN.

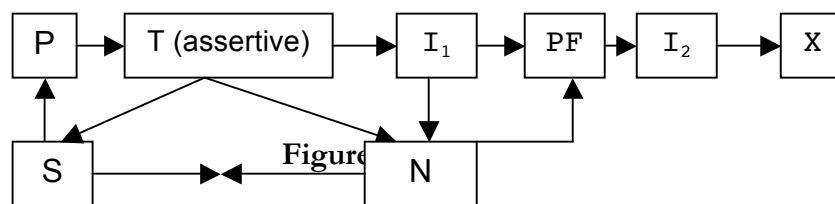
Having gone through the process by which names are extracted from Yoruba proverbs, we may now focus our attention to the theoretical framework upon which we shall premise this study in order to be able to expound the relevance of the proverbial names to the namer, named and the Yorùbá entire society.

6. Theoretical Framework⁵

In the present study, we shall adopt a Conservative Approach to pragmatic interpretation. As posited in Oluikpe (2004:356), the following pragmatic features are found very apposite to the explication of the pragmatic effects of Yorùbá proverbial names:

1. YPN consists of diminutive/abridged/short sentences, referred to in this study as the proposition (P)
2. These propositions are assertive in illocutionary force (T)
3. They are speech acts because they are context dependent.
4. There is one-way directional implicature (I_1 and I_2) that impacts on the named (N) and the wider society (X)

The above observations are illustrated in figure B below:



- where P = Proposition (name)
 T = assertive truth-value
 I^1 = implicature of T on the named (N)
 Pf= Percolationary force on (N)
 I^2 = Implicature of Pf on society (X)
 S = Namer
 N = Named

From figure B above, S and N share the assertive truth-value (T) from P as expressed by S. The T has implicature (I^1) on N who responds appropriately to give PF. The PF has its implications (I^2) that impacts on society (X). This configuration will be illustrated more explicitly later in this

study.

At this juncture however, two major aspects of our work need to be addressed: first, YPN as a speech act which entails conversational implicature, and second, as opined by Searle (1969:66), the need to depict how the hearer is able to decipher the proposition expressed in the name forms:

- (i) S has evidence (reason) for the truth of P
- (ii) It is not obvious to both S and H that H knows (does not need to be reminded of, etc) p
- (iii) S believes that P
- (iv) The speech act counts as an undertaking to the effect that P represents an Actual state of affairs.

where S = Speaker, H = Hearer, P = Proposition

From the above, it is deducible that both the speaker and the hearer share the truth-value, which is contained in the proposition. Further, the speaker is aware of the implications of the truth-value of the proposition before expressing it. To ensure that the truth-value of the proposition is actually shared by both the speaker and the hearer, Grice's (1975: 45-46) cooperative principle (CP) is here invoked. And, it states that for the speaker and the hearer to share the truth-value, condition of P, the following principles must be in force.

1. Quantity: Give the right amount of information
 - (a) Make your contributions as informative as required
 - (b) Do not make your contribution more informative than required
2. Quality: Try to make your contribution on that is true
 - (a) Do not say what you believe to be false
 - (b) Do not say that which you lack adequate evidence
3. Relation: be relevant
4. Manner: be perspicuous (i.e., be clear)
 - (a) Avoid obscurity
 - (b) Avoid ambiguity
 - (c) Be brief
 - (d) Be orderly

Since the Yoruba proverbs which source the YPN being explicated here are “a distillation of the wisdom if the people derived over the ages”, the concept of the CP is guaranteed, i.e., it is possible for the speaker and the hearer to share the truth-value of P. Our next task now is to relate the YPN with the framework in order to illustrate its relevance in the pragmatic interpretations of the YPN.

7. The Semantic Categories of YPN

Iwundu (1994:68) attempts a classification of the semantic categories of Igbo names and finds the followings:

- | | |
|------------------|------------------|
| (i) theophoric | (ii) ideational |
| (iii) monumental | (iv) testimonial |
| (v) relational | (vi) solicitory |
| (vii) admonitory | (viii) temporal |

Not all of these are attested by the class of names under focus in this study. Those that can be said to be involved are:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------|
| (i) ideational | (ii) testimonial |
| (iii) experiential/observatory | (iv) admonitory |
| (v) monumental | |

We shall briefly illustrate these five with relevant Yoruba proverbial names.

7.1 Ideational YPN

We subsume into this category all Yorùbá proverbial names that express the Yoruba traditional world-view on a wide range of issues such as the concept of destiny, kinship, universe, goodness of life, death, etc. The names are meant to express S's experience of the Yorùbá real world. The proposition (P) in this group holds that S shares T (truth-value) with N. Examples are found in our corpus numbers nos. 4, 6, 13 and 14 re-written as 23, 24, 25 and 26 respectively below:

- (23) **Àtidádé** (kìnniún kò sèyìn Olódùmarè)
Gloss: The monarchial status of lion among the animals is not without the authority of God.
- (24) **Ayélojà** (òrun ni ilé)
Gloss: The world is a mere market place while the heaven is eternal home.
- (25) **Bánúso** (má bá èniyàn so. Èniyàn ò sí mó, ayé dèké)
Gloss: Keep secrets to your self alone. Don't ever confide in anybody. No one is truly trustworthy.
- (26) **Omólàyòlé** (eni omo sin ló bímo)
Gloss: Never flaunt having children in your prime age until those children live to bury you at your old-age.

The I_1 (the implicature on N) of T is that virtuous life and the fortitude to face the vicissitudes of death are the ultimate experience in the world. N accepts I_1 by accepting to be called and addressed by his name belonging to this group. PF operates when N lives a virtuous life and faces the vicissitudes of death with fortitude. N's action results in I^2 for X, which is the belief that the society expects people bearing the names in this group to be persons of virtue. For details on this perspective, see Oluikpe (2004: 391).

7.2 Testimonial YPN

This class of names testifies to the fortunes of the individual in terms of all life achievements and glories. Examples are corpus nos. 8, 16 and 19, re-written as 27, 28 and 29. They extol achievements and endowments but not without some warnings.

- (27) **Àdábánijà** (eni ijà ò bá ní pe ara rè lókùnrin)
Gloss: One's stuff can only be determined in the face of difficulty i.e. only those who are not faced with hard times could brag of being invisible.
- (28) **Bólántà** (a wù wón, bóla bá dojúde tán, olá a máa sú ni. Àkèyinsí olá kǐ rò).
Gloss: It is attractively soothing when the position of honor is flourishing. But it becomes disgusting when it turns sour.
- (29) **Abèrùàgbà** (ni yóò te ilè yǐ pé)
Gloss: One who fears the elders would live long.

7.3 Experiential/Observatory YPN

These are corpus of names that express the life experience of the namer and the society based on the vicissitudes of life. Examples are corpus nos. 3, 5, 7, 10 and 12, re-written as 30, 31, 32, 33 and 34

- (30) **Bolódeòkú** (òde rè kǐ hu gbégi)
Gloss: While the owner of a premise is still alive, his park cannot be overgrown with weeds.
- (31) **Apálará** (ìgúnpá ni iyekan)
Gloss: Your diligence at work is your kinsman while your elbow (how hard you work) is your relation.
- (32) **Àjùmòbí** (kò kan tí àánú, eni olúwa bá rán sí ni, ní se ni lóore)
Gloss: Being benevolent has nothing to do with family ties. Goodness

can only come from any God-sent person

- (33) **Àkéjù** (ní ba omo olówó jé)
Gloss: It is sheer over-pampering that do spoil the lives of children from rich homes.
- (34) **Àbànikán-ń-dá**, ikán kò le mú òkúta)
Gloss: Termites are merely contemplating; they dare not gnaw at stones.

7.4 Admonitory YPN

The pragmatic interpretation of admonitory YPN is that they express tokens of admonition to guide individuals and guard his contemporary behavior and future undertakings. Our corpus no 9, 16 17 and 18, re-written as 35, 36, 37 and 38 illustrate the examples under focus.

- (35) **Awòlúmátèé** (ìwòn ara rè, ló mò)
Gloss: A stranger who would not loose his credibility must know his bounds.
- (36) **Bólántà** (a wù wón, bólá bá dojúde tán, olá a máa sú ni. Àkèyìnsí olá kù rò).
Gloss: It is attractively soothing when the position of honor is flourishing. But it becomes disgusting when it turns sour.
- (37) **Agbójúlógún** (fí ara rè fún òsì ta)
Gloss: One who relies on inheritance would turn a pauper.
- (38) **Tanímòla** kò sí àyàfí Olórun oba.
Gloss: (No one knows tomorrow except God)

7.5 Monumental YPN

Names in this semantic group are proverbial names that extol remarkable personal achievements in physical skills, material wealth, social status, and economic endeavors. The socio-semantics of this class of names is that S and N share assertion that a life that leaves indelible footprints on the sand of time is the one that is desirable. Its implicature on the truth-value, therefore, is that ambition is a great catalyst to success in life. By accepting to be called and addressed by this name, N works very hard to succeed. PF operates when N lives up to what his name symbolizes – heroism. I₂ of N's behavior is that there are in every society great achievers in different occupation that are socially lauded. Morality is emphasized in this context. Examples of names in this group are our corpus numbers 5 and 17 re-written as 39 and 40.

- (39) **Apálará** (ìgúnpá ni iyekan)
Gloss: Your diligence at work is your kinsman while your elbow (how hard you work) is your relation.
- (40) **Agbójúlógún** (fí ara rè fún òsì ta)
Gloss: One who relies on inheritance would turn a pauper.

8. Conclusion

This study has attempted to cast a look at the vocative function of names and found that only pithy expressions could be appropriate. The study has also noted that proverbial expressions are copious yet a group of them are sometimes used as names. The mechanisms involved in the new/changing roles of proverbs being used as YPN are the thrust of this paper. We opine that the thematic contents of the proverbs are the tokens that are relevant as the proverbial names.

Furthermore, we found that YPNs are parts of genres that ensure continuity of identity and consistency of ethos in pre-literate Yoruba society because the interpretations that the names suggest contain truth-value that cannot be faulted or disdained. YPNs, therefore, represent unwritten regulations for the individual members and the society on a number of issues like caution, limit of carnal man, the essence of man, kinship, absolute hope and trust in God, the pregnant nature of future life, etc.

It is regrettable, however, that as elastic and educative as this class of names is, Yoruba

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people no longer take on these kinds of names. Changing societal perspectives, coupled with impoverished knowledge of the indigenous language, foreign religions that cast aspersions on native culture, and the emerging new interests about naming practices among the Yorùbá, can be said to be accountable.

End notes

1. See for details Ogunwale (2003:24)
2. See Ekundayo (1977) for details.
3. Apart from those cited in Bamgbose (1968) a whole conference was organized by Yusuf (2006) on this genre.
4. *Kílàńkó* (what is it that we are celebrating) is not expecting any specific answer. The same truth holds in respect of *Tanímoówò* (who is perfect enough to nurse (the child))
5. We owe the perspectives expressed in this section to Oluikpe (2004: 385) where he used the paradigm for IPN pragmatics.

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