



Politeness Phenomenon in *Abiku* Names Among the Yoruba Africans: A Pragmatic Study

PHÉNOMÈNE DE POLITESSE DANS LES NOMS DE ABIKU PARMIS LES AFRICAINS YORUBA: UNE ÉTUDE PRAGMATIQUE

Idowu Odebode^{1,*}; Adenike Onadipe²

¹Department of English, Redeemer's University, Nigeria

²Department of English, Redeemer's University, Nigeria

Email: sidor09@yahoo.com

*Corresponding author.

Email: iodebode@yahoo.com

Received 10 October 2011; accepted 30 November 2011

Abstract

This study attempts a pragmatic study of *Abiku* names from the face act theory's perspective.

The thrust of the work is to establish that certain politeness acts are either violated or obeyed in the Yoruba naming systems of *Abiku* children; thereby proving the economy of words in names and that more is communicated than said within the little strands of letters. Ten *Abiku* names are selected and analyzed using the pragmatic principle of face act. The study indicates that names, (in particular, *Abiku* names) in the traditional African Yoruba setting, transcend ordinary labeling to historicize, socialize, spiritualize and influence people psychologically.

Key words: *Abiku*; Yoruba; Face acts; Saworo; Life cycle; Anthroponym; Death

Résumé

Cette étude tente d'une étude pragmatique des noms *abiku* du point de vue de la théorie des actes de visage.

L'idée maîtresse de ce travail est d'établir que les actes certaine politesse sont soit violé ou obéi dans les systèmes de Yoruba nom des enfants *abiku*; prouvant ainsi l'économie de mots dans les noms et que plus est communiquée à ladite au sein de l'brins peu de lettres Dix *abiku*. noms sont sélectionnés et analysés en utilisant le principe pragmatique de la Loi sur le visage. l'étude indique que les noms, (en particulier, les noms *abiku*) dans la mise en Yoruba traditionnelle africaine, transcendent l'étiquetage ordinaires d'historiciser, de socialiser, spiritualiser et influencer les gens psychologiquement.

Mots-clés: *Abiku*; Yoruba; Les actes du visage; Saworo; Cycle de vie; Anthroponyme; La mort

Idowu Odebode, Adenike Onadipe (2011). Politeness Phenomenon in *Abiku* Names Among the Yoruba Africans: A Pragmatic Study. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 7(4), 127-132. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020110704.215> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020110704.215>

INTRODUCTION

The study of names in general has been attempted by several researchers. But to the best of our knowledge, no one has ever used The Face Act Theory (otherwise The Politeness Principle) to analyze *Abiku* names in relation to the Yoruba tradition. This work has therefore been designed to fill this gap. It will examine the pragmatic analysis of Yoruba *Abiku* names, majorly employing the speech act theory. The work is predicated on the following vital questions:

- What are the lexico-semantic components of the term, *Abiku*?
- What are the face act elements identifiable in *Abiku* names?
- How are the meanings of these names used to unravel the actions of the speech?

THE YORUBA GROUP

The Yoruba predominantly live in South-western Nigeria as one of the three major speech communities in the country. The other groups are: the Hausa and Igbo (also called Ibo). The Hausa are found in the north while the Igbo reside in the South-east of the country. As a nation within the state of Nigeria, the Yoruba share common language, similar culture and a definite geographical

boundary. They believe Ile-Ife as their ancestral home and Oduduwa as their progenitor.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE ABIKU PHENOMENON

Abiku is a phenomenon that has its basis in the African cultural belief, especially among the Yoruba (where it is known as *Abiku*), Igbo and Itshekiri (where it is called *Ogbanje*). *Abiku* is a “spirit” child that is born to die. He is a child that is not decisive about living or otherwise. He therefore, continues to move round the cycle of constant birth, death and rebirth. An *Abiku* is believed to belong to a band of demons, which live near or inside a big *Iroko* tree. As a result, pregnant women are warned against night movement around such a tree, otherwise, *Abiku* children will enter them. Similarly, an *Abiku* is said to possess power to penetrate a pregnant woman when the sun is very hot during the day.

Furthermore, *Abiku* children are believed to have appointed days for them to depart from the world. Some choose to die immediately after birth, while some others wait for a while, pretending as if they have come to stay. An *Abiku* child has something that attracts people’s attention to him or her. *Abiku* is either so good looking that he or she is lavishly spent upon, or sickly, that his or her state of health consumes the whole household expenses.

Africans believe in the existence of life beyond this immediate world. This notion has gained popularity among African writers, who formally refer to it as an instance of “magical realism”. Some of these writers are Soyinka (1967), Clark (1967) and Okri (1991). It is noteworthy that Fagunwa (1968) and Tutuola (1952) among others, have initially written a lot on ideas related to the supernatural, but not strictly *Abiku*. In the Western world, this magical realism is known as “marvelous realism”.

Africans tend to agree that there is a link between the physical and the spiritual world. The spirit world is so powerful that it is able to determine how long children born into this world would live. This idea has been portrayed in such a way that children, who stay in the spirit world, believe that life is cruel and that the world is a dangerous place to live. They, therefore, ensure that “things” that bind them to the spirit world are hidden in secret places, such that people of this world can hardly find them to destroy. Some of these magical charms are believed to be hidden in thick forest, under gigantic trees.

Nevertheless, knowing well that *Abiku* children aim to make every family into which they are born poor, several means to thwart their plans are adopted. The spirit companions, whom *Abiku* keeps, must be placated. The mother of *Abiku* therefore, offers sacrifices to these spirits. At times, feasts that require the preparation of beans and palm oil are held for the child. His spirit companions are

expected to be present at the feast and appeased with such. The *Abiku* child is further accoutered with charms like jingles (*saworo*) in order to use the sound to scare away his spirit mates. Protective amulets, rings and wristlet beads are used to stop the spirit companions from forcing *Abiku* to rejoin them. If *Abiku* still dies, in spite of all these efforts, Abraham (1962, p.7) posits that:

Its corpse is maltreated and wounds and blows believed to make indelible marks are inflicted. Sometimes, the body is hacked up and in every case, must be thrown into the “bush”: the idea is that thereby, the *abiku*-spirit suffers and becomes incapable of entering a human body.

ABIKU NAMES

What is more amazing is that in most cases, as soon as the mother that had the dead *Abiku* child gives birth to another child, the inscriptions done on the former child are noticed in the later. Clark (1967, p.61) attests to this in the following lines:

We know the knife scars
Serrating down your back and front
Like beak of the sword fish,
And both your ears notched...
Are all relics of your first comings. (Clark, 1967, p.61)

As soon as such is observed, the child is given a specific name, which is strongly believed to be capable of keeping him alive. The name could be derogatory, condemning, or appealing as it is borne out of frustration (depending on how many times the mother has lost the *Abiku*). Whatever may be the immediate function of the name, what it is intended is to keep the child alive. *Abiku* names appeal to the emotions or tarnish the images of children in such a category.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Politeness Theory is basically concerned with the redressing of the slur to face posed by face-threatening acts to addressees. It was propounded by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in 1978. According to Brown and Levinson (1987, p.61), politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearers’ “face”. Face in this context refers to the respect that an individual has for himself and maintaining that “self-esteem” in public or in private situations. Being polite therefore consists of a deliberate attempt to save face for another. Odeunmi (2002, p.181) defines face as “the emotional and social feeling of self which an individual has and expects others to recognize.” Politeness thus is simply an attempt to save face for another. It expresses a speaker’s intention to take the edge off face threats that accompany certain face threatening acts toward the co-interlocutors. Face is actually the public self image that every adult tries to maintain in social interactions. A face could either be positive or negative.

Positive face is simply a person’s self esteem. A face

can be said to be positive if the bearer wants to be ratified, admired and desired by people. A positive face is based on "wish". An average human wants attention. Hence, anyone in such a category does everything to enable people to notice him or her. It could be in the form of a show of talent or flaunt of possession. In essence, nobody wants to be disapproved. A positive face is however threatened, if the individual is ignored.

A negative face is characterized by a person's desire for freedom from being imposed upon or checked. The bearer of such a face wants to be respected and acknowledged; he is will-driven. A negative face is threatened if the freedom of action and the choice of a person are not respected. The threat of a negative face can cause damage to the speaker or the listener, when either of them submits his will.

From the above, it can be inferred that a face threatening act is an act that causes damage to the face of the speaker or the listener, by acting in opposition to the desires of the other. It has been observed also that in an interaction, face threatening act is scarcely avoidable because, the communicants may not bear the same kind of face. Cooperation is therefore needed, if both faces must be saved.

Furthermore, some politeness strategies have been suggested by Brown and Levinson. They are used to compose messages in order to save faces, when face threatening acts are inevitable. These strategies are: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record. Bald on-record occurs, when the speaker tries to avoid the danger of being misunderstood. It is aimed at minimizing threat. Yet, it is employed when there is a close relationship between the speaker and the audience. This is because, imperative sentences are often used. Hence, the hearer may be surprised, if the message is not properly understood.

Positive politeness is used to make the hearer feel important. It basically seeks to minimize threat to the hearer's positive face. Therefore, statements of friendship, unity and complements are regarded as strategies of positive politeness. Negative politeness is employed to avoid the imposition on the hearer. The speaker therefore requests that the hearer carries out an action. The hearer is not obliged, but rather made to know that he or she has a choice to either respond or not. Off-record relates to what Austin (1962) refers to as indirect speech act. The hearer is indirectly ordered to carry out some actions. An example is when a speaker says "The room is getting hot". It is the duty of the hearer to know that he or she is expected to do something; to open the window.

Geoffrey Leech (1983) also contributes to the politeness principle with his maxims of conversation. These maxims focus on how to minimize the face threatening acts and save the hearer's face. He proposes six maxims which are; tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. The first and second

form a pair as the third and fourth.

a) The Tact Maxim: Minimize the expression of beliefs which imply cost to the other; maximize the expression of beliefs which imply benefit to the other. This relates to the Brown and Levinson's negative politeness strategy of minimizing the imposition. It also corresponds to the positive politeness strategy of attending to the hearer's interests, wants and needs. The hearer is rather implored than forced.

b) The Generosity Maxim: Minimize the expression of benefit to self and maximize the expression of cost to self. This principle is concerned with the selfless act of the speaker. Every speech and action must first be to the benefit of the hearer, before the speaker's.

c) The Approbation Maxim: Minimize the expression of beliefs which express dispraise of other; maximize the expression of beliefs which express approval of other'. This maxim is particular about making others feel good about themselves. In case this is not possible, then the speaker is expected to evade the issue to avoid disagreement. The maxim also teaches the importance of expressing solidarity with others.

d) The Modesty Maxim: Minimize the expression of praise of self; maximize the expression of dispraise of self. It teaches that others should be the ones to approve our conducts because, they have a better view of us. We should not have too much belief in ourselves.

e) The Agreement Maxim: Minimize the expression of disagreement between self and other; maximize the expression of agreement between self and other. It emphasizes on unity. This is as well, in accordance with Brown and Levinson's positive strategy of seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement.

f) The Sympathy Maxim: Minimize antipathy between self and other; maximize sympathy between self and other. The speaker's expression should reflect some concern for the hearer's condition. This identifies with Brown and Levinson's positive strategy of attending to the listener's interests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oluikpe (2004) in a review article studies names in Igbo society of Nigeria. The summary of his finding is that names in Igbo impact not only on the lives of the bearers but also on the wider society because names reflect enduring social norms and belief systems. As different from the present study which examines *Abiku* names in Yoruba contexts, Oluikpe's work is based on Igbo sociocultural context.

Abel (2007) disproves Levi-Strauss' hypothesis that birds are more likely to be given human names than dogs. Levi-Strauss' claim was propped by the fact that birds' world, (in relation to home building, maintenance of family lives and nurturing of their younger ones) metaphorically is thought of as closely resembling that of

human. Abel on the other hand, argues that since dogs and cats relate more closely with humans than birds, they are taken as part of families. In fact, dogs are made to feed on human food. They also enjoy some affection from their caretakers.

Consequently, they are given human names. He further observes that if people had found human names more befitting for birds than dogs, birds should not be left in cages or outside the house. The point where this study identifies with Abel's argument is that he considers how human names are given to animals, while a section of this work regards how humans are named after animals. The only difference in the two cases has to do with the kind of emotions involved. The practice of naming animals after man is borne out of endearment. On the contrary, men are named after animals disparagingly.

Maalej (2009) does a cognitive semantic consideration of naming as an idealized cognitive model. He discovered that in Tsunami Arabic, naming involves projecting one's own personality onto one's children. Hence, first names for females and males form the core of the data used in the work. The work is similar to the present study because, it aims at enlightening the public about naming culture in a particular society. It differs from this work because it focuses on the Tsunami Arabic naming culture while we target the Yoruba Nigerians naming culture in this study.

Heffernan (2010) considers the practice of appropriating English personal names among the young Chinese and Koreans as opposed to the young Japanese, who seldom adopt English personal names. The relatedness between the current study and Heffernan's is that names of humans form the basis of discussion. It is however different from this work in the sense that it examines English anthroponyms while our major focus is on Yoruba *abiku* names.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Bankale (Stay with Me till "Night")

Bankale denotes stay with me till night. By this name, damage to the negative face of *Abiku* has been done because he is commanded to live with the speaker till old age ("night"). The Yoruba believe in three periods (*igba/asiko*) or life times namely: *owuro* (morning), *osan* (afternoon) and *ale* (night). These connote childhood, youth and adulthood respectively. This is why *abiku* is being compelled by the parent to stay with her till night. If *Abiku* had his own way, he would have died immediately after birth. *Abiku* is not only commanded to stay alive. He is also indirectly given a responsibility; he must care for his parents at old age. *Abiku's* standard has been flouted. As a result, the maxim of tact is violated.

Beyioku... (If this one does not Die...)

An act of promising is silently done by this name. If *Abiku*

must get whatever is intended by the speaker (the name giver), then he (the bearer) must live. However, the namer is tactful because instead using an imperative language (or command), s/he reasoned that the best way to keep the *Abiku* is to put him in suspense. By this, his (*Abiku's*) negative face is still respected. Hence, the maxim of tact is adhered to because *Abiku* is not coerced.

Ikuforiji (Death has Forgiven)

The full potential of this name is *Ikuforijimi* (Death has forgiven me). The positive face of the speaker (presumably the *Abiku's* mother) has been saved. For the fact that the child is alive till the time s/he is being named, the mother has been forgiven and has found favor before death, as desired. Hence the sympathy maxim of Leech has been obeyed.

Ikurunmi (Death has Ruined Me)

By the name *Ikurunmi* (death has ruined me), the speaker's positive face has been damaged. She (the mother) expects death to be gracious to her by releasing the *Abiku*, but the opposite is the case. Hence, the maxim of sympathy has been ignored (by death). The maxim says: Minimize antipathy between self and other; maximize sympathy between self and other.

Ikusimo (Death does not Recognize Him)

It is the negative face of death that is damaged by the name *Ikusimo* (Death does not recognize him). Death has been deceived such that it does not have its way. The maxim of approbation, which says: minimize the expression of beliefs which express dispraise of others, has been disobeyed. The name signifies a mockery of death.

Ikuyinnu (Death has Left Him alone)

The full realization of this name is *Ikuyinminu* meaning death has left me alone. Pragmatically, the name is ambiguous because this full potential refers to the giver i.e. the *Abiku's* parent, while its contraction (*Ikuyinnu* - Death has left him alone) refers to the bearer, *Abiku*. However, *Abiku* will be answerable to either of the two forms of the name adopted eventually. Through this name, the positive face of the speaker has been saved and death has ignored the bearer, *Abiku*, as desired by his parents. The maxim of generosity has therefore, been observed.

Omodeinde (The Child Returns)

The positive face of the speaker (most likely the mother) has been saved. The child that was not wanted dead has come back (been reborn) at last. *Abiku* has obeyed the maxim of generosity because, his return is aimed at pleasing the speaker, not himself.

Siwoku (Take Your Hands Off Death)

This name causes damage to *Abiku's* negative face. He is commanded to stop dying, as against his will. The maxim of tact is disregarded (violated) because, the expression is

to the speaker's benefit.

Yemiitan (Stop Deceiving Me)

Abiku's negative face has been threatened by this name, Yemiitan (Stop deceiving me). He is tagged a deceiver and commanded to stop his deceptive act. *Abiku* is thus dispraised. Therefore, the maxim of approbation is violated.

Yetunde (Mother has Arrived Again)

Yetunde is a name that proves the Yoruba's belief in reincarnation. If a man has just lost his mother and subsequently, his wife put to bed and delivers a baby girl. That child is called *Yetunde* or *Iyabo*. To a large extent, this name saves the positive face of its bearer. Since it is believed that the dead mother is the one that has returned, the child will be highly revered and cared for. Hence the desire to be cherished has been achieved. The speaker i.e. the namer has maximized the expression of belief, which expresses approval of *Abiku's* return. Therefore, attention is paid to Leech's maxim of approbation.

DEATH DERIVATIVE NAMES

From the analysis above, we may infer that (60 percent i.e.) six out of the ten names studied have death derivative(s) because graphologically, the names are either prefixed or suffixed with the word *iku* (or its contracted form *ku*) denoting death as in *Beyioku*, *Ikuforiji*, *Ikusimo*, *Ikurunmi*, *Ikuyinnu* and *Siwoku*. This therefore reaffirms the fact that the *abiku* concept has a lot to do with the issue of death. Alternatively, the four remaining names (i.e. 40 percent) contain certain syllables suggestive of "life cycle, arriving/leaving and deception" as follows:

- le* (night) as in *Bankale* (Stay with me till "night")
- de* (return/arrive) as in *Omodehinde* (The child returns/ has arrived)
- de* (arrive) as in *Yetunde* (Mother has arrived again)
- tan* (deception) as in *Yemiitan* (Stop deceiving me)

The above is represented in Table 1 and Fig. 1 following:

Table 1
A Table Indicating Percentage of Death Derivative Names

Type	Percentage
Names with death derivative	60
Names without death derivative	40

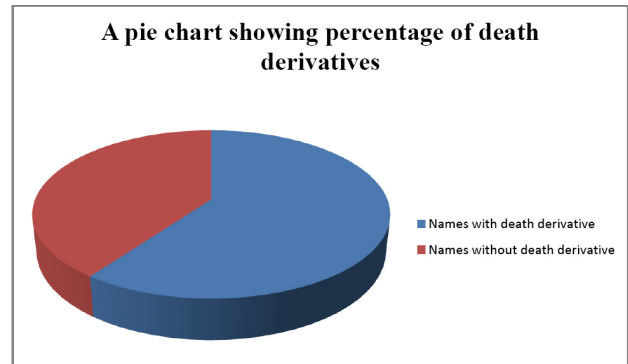


Figure 1
A Pie Chart Showing Percentage of Death Derivatives Summary of the Maxims Deployed

From the discussion so far, it can be established that a total of five maxims (approbation, sympathy, generosity and tact) by Leech are deployed across the ten *abiku* names studied. We discovered that five names obeyed the rules while five violated them respectively. This is represented in the Table 2 below:

Table 2
A Table Showing Maxims Violated and Observed

Name	Maxim violated	Maxim observed
Bankale	Tact	
Beyioku		Tact
Ikuforiji		Sympathy
Ikurunmi	Sympathy	
Ikusimo	Approbation	
Ikuyinnu		Generosity
Omodehinde		Generosity
Siwoku	Tact	
Yemiitan	Approbation	
Yetunde		Approbation

Furthermore, a frequency distribution of the maxims (across the names as indicated above) is attempted. This indicates that the Tact maxim is observed once (in *Beyioku*) and violated twice (in *Bankale* and *Siwoku*); sympathy is violated (in *Ikurunmi*) and obeyed (in *Ikuforiji*) one time each; approbation is obeyed once (in *Yetunde*) and violated times (in *Ikusimo* and *Yemiitan*) while generosity is not violated at all but observed two times (in *Ikuyinnu* and *Omodehinde*). This analysis therefore suggests that Tact and Approbation are deployed three times each; Sympathy and Generosity, two times respectively. These situations are represented with the following Table 3 and Fig. 2:

Table 3
A Table Indicating the Frequency of the Maxims Deployed

maxims	observed	violated
Tact	1	2
Sympathy	1	1
Approbation	1	2
Generosity	2	0

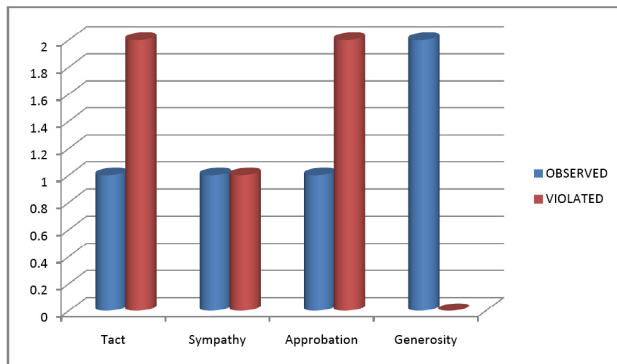


Figure 2
A Multiple Bar Chart Showing the Maxims Deployed

CONCLUSION

So far, we have attempted the face act theory on the analysis of *abiku* names among the Yoruba. The study has indicated that names, (in particular, *abiku* names) are not just given in the traditional African Yoruba setting. They transcend ordinary labelling or identification to “historicize, socialize, spiritualize and influence people psychologically” (Ogunsiji, 2001, p.32). Based on the above, we may conclude that names in African cultures are carefully constructed “in a semantico- syntactic sense to manifest specific meanings” (Oyeleye, 1991, p.16).

REFERENCES

Abel, E. L. (2007). Birds are not More Human than Dogs: Evidence from Naming. *Names*, 55(4), 349-353.

Abraham, R. C. (1962). *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena. In E. Goody (Ed.), *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction* (pp. 56-311). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics 4*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Clark, J. P. (1967). *Abiku*. In Nwoga, D. I. (Ed.), *West African Verse* (p.61). Great Britain: Longman.

Fagunwa, D. O. (1968). *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Nelson Publishers Ltd.

Herfferman, K. (2010). English Name Use by East Asians in Canada: Linguistic Pragmatics or Cultural Identity? *Names*, 58(1), 24-36.

Leech, G. N. (1983). *The Principles of Pragmatics*. New York: Longman.

Maalej, Z. (2009). An Idealised Cognitive Model of Naming: Converging Linguistic and Cognitive Evidence from Tunisian Arabic. In A. Odeunmi, E. A. Arua, & S. Arimi (Eds.), *Language, Gender and Politics* (pp. 35-63). Lagos, Nigeria: Concept Publications Limited.

Odeunmi, A. (2002). The Pragmatics of Face Acts in a Nigerian University Administration. In S. T. Babatunde & D. S. Adeyanju (Eds), *Language, Meaning & Society* (pp. 179-192). Ilorin: Haytee Press and Publishing Co. Nig. Ltd.

Ogunsiji, A. O. (2001). *Decoding Soyinka's 'Faction': A Linguistic Stylistic Study*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Dept. of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Okri, B. (1991). *The Farmished Road*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books.

Oluikpe, B. (2004). Igbo Personal Names: A Generalized Pragmatic Interpretation. In K. Owolabi & A. Dasylyva (Eds.), *Forms and Functions of English and Indigenous Languages in Nigeria. A Festschrift in Honour of Ayo Banjo* (pp. 383-397). Ibadan, Nigeria: Group Publisher.

Oyeleye, A. L. (1991). Things Fall Apart Revisited: A Semantic and Stylistic Study of Characters in Achebe. In E. D. Jones (Ed.), *African Literature Today* (p.17).

Tutuola, A. (1952). *The Palmwine Drinkard*. London: Faber and Faber.