SEMANTIC APPROACHES IN ONOMASTIC STUDY: THE AWKA ANTHROPONOMASTIC EXPERIENCE

IFEOMA EMMANUELA UDYOYE
Department of English Language
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University
Igbariam Campus

Abstract
This paper draws attention to the perennial problem of lack of theories stressed by earlier onomastic scholars which may have prompted them to dismiss names as mere referents which are meaningless. This implies that names do not say anything about the bearer and an individual can bear any name. This view is contrary to African name scholars’ view, as they believe that every African name is meaningful, hence, the importance of semantics in studying African names. The paper discusses various semantic theories already known such as connotation, denotation, referential, mentalist, ideational, and behaviourism and how the theories can be used eclectically in analysing African personal names so that name study would be considered as a science and part of formal linguistics.

Keywords: meaning, names, theory, language.

Introduction
For a long time, name study in Nigeria has been relegated to the background and not considered as part of formal linguistics because of lack of theories. Algeo (2010) is of the view that any onomastic theory should start by understanding the meaning of names which is semantics. For a name to be capable of arousing the interest of scholars, such a name should be able to perform multiple tasks. Names should be able to identify and carry out activities which respond to the needs and interests of the bearers and ensure that the names are adequately reflected in their behaviour and future outcome. Awka is a dialect of Igbo spoken in Awka South Local Government found in the South Eastern part of Nigeria. Awka town is known as the seat of indigenous technology and craft, hence, carving and iron works industry are predominant in the area. Five states make up the Igbo speaking states these are: Enugu, Abia, Imo, Anambra, Ebonyi and some parts of Rivers and Delta states. The Igbo people live within the latitude of 5° - 7° east of the Greenwich line with a population of 30 million people. It is one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa and is preoccupied with farming, trading and craftsmanship. Igbo belongs to the West Benue Congo family of the larger group of Niger Congo language family which is the largest in Africa in terms of number of speakers and geographical area where it is spoken with about 1,436 languages which are distinct languages. Language under this phylum has four characteristics which are: noun classes, tone, nasality and verb serialization (Williamson & Blench, 2000).

Anthroponyms
Anthroponyms are the formation of personal names which have strong syntactic and semantic interest in linguistics. Suzman (1994) opines that a personal name is the most private and particular symbol of an individual which lives throughout an individual’s life. Additionally, Laver (2010) emphasizes that personal names given to an individual reflect the periods of great socio-political upheaval such as the Nazi of Germany. Furthermore, Suzman (1994) posits that Zulu personal names mirror values and attitudes within a particular social context. In the light of the above, Gae (2011) observes that personal names embody an ideal, a faith, a
will, a wish, a virtue, love for the family, ancestors, hometown and country. Algeo (2010), explained that personal names are a kind of words, and words are the basic features of language. This is similar to Mphande’s (2006) assertion that names are words with the most meaningful lexicon in the vocabulary of any language. This supports Anagbogu (2002) observation that linguistics as a scientific study of language and as an autonomous discipline cooperates actively on equal footing, with a host of other disciplines such as onomastics, semiotics, logic, anthropology, geography, sociology. Some extra linguistic areas have become part and parcel of linguistics therefore the study of anthroponyms is apt.

Igbo Naming Ceremony
Naming ceremony also known as ‘Igu aha’ is an important aspect of Igbo culture whereby names are assigned to the new born baby by the parents and grandparents. Where the names chosen are not significant, the name of the market day in which the child is born is given to the child. Igbo names often reflect the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child or the aspirations of the parents for the child. This aspect of culture is done in order to fulfil social-religious obligations. It is usually done on the 7th or 12th day after the child is born depending on the locality using Igbo calendar whereby four market days (eke, oye, afior, nkwo) make up a week. Before the advent of modernity, during naming ceremony, women used to rub ‘nzu’ which is a ‘white smooth substance’ on their necks as a symbol of purity of heart and happiness for the new born baby and his family, but in the contemporary Igbo world, powder is now used. However, it is pertinent to note that this traditional practice of naming ceremony is no longer practiced in some parts of Igbo land.

The History of Documentation of Names
Names have been with man from time immemorial. To trace the history of name is like trying to trace the history of humanity. From the biblical point of view, God named the first man on earth Adam which means ‘man’ (cf. Genesis 2:19-20). Additionally, Essien (2006) observed that Adam’s wife Eve which means ‘life’ named their son Cain ‘with the help of Lord, I brought forth a man’. Subsequently, with the rise of Christianity, Christians were encouraged to name their children after saints and martyrs of the church such as ‘Paul’, ‘Nicholas’, ‘Mark’, ‘Martin’ etc.. Referring to evolution, Crystal (1997) noted that William Camden (1623) made the first attempt at documenting given names and surnames. After his publication, people became interested in knowing the histories of names especially, their origins and usage. Subsequently, Igbo scholars have also attempted to document Igbo personal names. Such scholars include Ubahakwe (1982), Okafor et al (2008) and Mbabuike (1996). The effort in this paper can also be seen as belonging to the general endeavour to document the names of persons.

The Meaning of Names in Different Cultures
Naming is a global phenomenon which has deep cultural, historical, social and religious implications. This subsection first gives an overview of the significance of names in different cultures before focusing on the categorization of such issues in Igbo names.

In the Roman culture, names indicated social rank. Claudius for example, is from a Roman family name and was derived from Latin claudus ‘lame, crippled’. This was the family name of several Roman emperors of the 1st century, including the emperor known simply as Claudius. The name was later borne by several early saints, including a 7th-century bishop of Besançon.
For the Ashantis and Akans of Ghana, the day of birth is usually given as one of the names an individual bears and these names are believed to determine the behaviour of the bearer. It is believed that Edwoada ‘Monday-born is supposed to be peaceful and calm’, Friday-born is a wanderer and adventurer and a Saturday-born is creative (Agyekum 2006).

For the Nandi of Kenya their names reflect their past pastoral hunter-gatherer, and nomadic life. Examples of names that express these are: Kwombo Kong’wailey ‘father of the limbing bullock’, Kiplimo ‘the boy of when the cows are going for morning gazing’ (Choge 2006). Sometimes, names are given because of the success of a bearer. For instance, the victory of Obama as the first black President of the United States of America has made most Kenyan mothers name their children ‘Obama’ because they admire him and hope that their children would be motivated and inspired to work hard and reach for greater heights by sharing the name (cf. BBC News 2008).

In other cultures, like the Egyptian culture, “real name” is kept secret because it is believed that names have direct links to one’s soul; therefore, a person’s name carries with it the power to control him (The Oxford Companion to the English Language 1996). For some other people (as slated in Babylonian Talmud), names have supernatural influence over the bearers (Herford, 1975).

Among the Igbo people, names are symbolic. Igbo names can generally be classified under the following categories: joy, sorrow, death, seasons of the year, cultural factors, wealth, individual’s place of birth, control of individual’s destiny, and recalling/remembering the past.

The names that belong to the first category are associated with joyful events or occasions. Examples of such names are Ánúlikàlílí (full form of Ánulika) ‘joy is excessive’, Árínzèchukwu ‘Thank God’, Òníàbíá ‘Joy has arrived’, Sómítóochukwu ‘Join me in praising God’. The next group is associated with sorrow. The names that belong to this group can refer to persistent evil or death. The examples from this group are Òzóémèzinà ‘may evil not happen again’, Ònwúíkè ‘violent death’; others are Ònwúmèrè ‘death has caused it’, Ònwúìbìkó ‘death please’, Ònwúìgbùnà ‘may death not kill’. The third group is made up of names that indicate seasons of the year. The examples here include: Úgúlú ‘harmattan; a name attributed to a sharp restless and tough person’, Ókọchì ‘dry season; a praise name for an achiever’ Êgírígí ‘dew; a name given to one who boasts without backing it up with action’.

The fourth group of names is linked with culture. The examples are Údèmgbà ‘famous wrestler’, Nwángènè ‘child of the streamed’; Òbíjí ‘home of yams’ Òbídígwè ‘a household that boasts of the multitude of members’. The fifth group of names is allied with wealth. The examples are Úbá ‘wealth’, Òkùkàliù ‘wealth overflows’, Òbianùjú ‘a child born into wealth’. The sixth group of names is used not only to recognize an individual but also to reflect the individual’s place of birth or residence, or time and space. Such names are Úgónkwọ ‘a beautiful child born on nkwo day’; Òkóyè ‘a male child born on Oye day’, Nwôbi ‘a child born during the installation of an Òbì’.

Igbo people also believe that àfà à gùlù ónyé nà -áchójé yà ‘one’s name plays an important role in determining the destiny of the individual’. Names give information about the people, their belief, history and their universe. It is unheard of in Igboland for example, that an individual has no name, for every human being has experiences surrounding his birth, and every parent has aspirations for their children which they make known through the names they give. Mbabuike (1996) opines that in Igboland, names are cherished by all and sundry.
There is an Igbo adage that says ‘ézí áhà kà égò’ meaning that ‘good name is better than riches’ and also, ‘à nághí ázú nwā n’áhiá’ ‘a child cannot be bought from the market’. Some of the above ideas are reflected in names like, Òkpánkū ‘collector of firewood’, Ôbianúkó ‘a child born during scarcity’, or Ìchêànúfè ‘one’s pre-occupied thought is often shielded away from advice’. Nwákégó ‘a child is more precious than money’, Ègõéyínwà ‘money is not a substitute for a child’, Àkụ̀ábụ́nwá ‘wealth can never be a child’. Igbo names also have a lot to do with remembrance; examples of such names are; Ônòchíè ‘he has replaced the dead’, Nnàmdì ‘my father lives on’, Nnennà ‘mother’s father’. Finally, the above points suffice to demonstrate how significant names are in Igboland and the fact that Igbo names can serve as the route towards understanding the way of life of our fore-fathers and of knowing more about them. The investigation of Igbo names therefore amounts to an investigation of a major aspect of Igbo and African cultures.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Meaningfulness Theory**

Meaningfulness theory is found in the early studies by Frege (1892) as cited in Langendonck (2007). He integrated the ideas of meaningfulness as it affects proper names. Frege addressed the problem of distinguishing between non-referring, non-denoting or empty expression. The theory assumed that an expression can have a sense but, lacks a reference. Meaningfulness of proper names, according to Frege, helps to demonstrate that sense cannot be defined simply as the mode of presentation of the reference because sometimes there is no reference being presented. Also, Russell (1918) as cited in Langendonck 2007) and Jespersen (1924) opined that names connote the greatest attributes and are therefore meaningful. However, the theorists failed to analyse the theory cross-linguistically to enable a generalized conclusion. Besides, Olenyo (2011) has argued that Lulogooli names in Tanzania are semantically motivated and are thereby meaningful because they are got from man and natural resources such as seasons, social activities, political activities, famine, wars and poverty. Also, Norton (2000) observed that names are laden with meaning, reflecting the attitudes, beliefs and values of occupying cultures hence, the theory will be useful to the present study.

**Theories of Meaning**

Semantics is the study of meaning. The reason for including a detailed work on semantics is that over the years, there has been controversies on meaningfulness and meaninglessness of names and for any study of onomastics to be understood, the meaning of the names most be attached hence the need for a semantic study. Many scholars such as Lyons (1981), Saeed (1997), Lobner (2002) and Ogbulugo (2005) have studied semantics from philosophical and linguistic points of view. Philosophical linguistics examines semantics as the conditions which linguistic expressions and the things they refer to are true or false, while linguistic semantics is the study of how language organizes and expresses meanings, (Kreidler, 1998). But, for the purpose of this study, linguistic semantics would be adopted as the focus of discussion. Semantics could be described as the study of meaning which is expressed by elements such as words, phrases, clauses, and sentences of a language. Yet, the meaning of meaning has remained a subject of controversy. Even though Ogden and Richards, (1923), and Lyons (1981) tried to give a working definition of meaning, such that ‘meaning’ should be regarded as having an existence which is independent of language, which is a carrier of meaning,’ it still resulted to controversy. Meaning is essential because names are words and
words are carriers of meaning. For the meaning of a name to be realized, a morpheme to morpheme interpretation is often used. Consider the examples below:

1) Name

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Chúkwú ebú ká</td>
<td>‘mighty God’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God big much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Ífẹ ômá</td>
<td>‘good thing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thing good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Chí nà èdú</td>
<td>‘God leads me’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is lead</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Chí ômá</td>
<td>‘good God’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Ìké chúkwú</td>
<td>‘God’s strength’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above examples, it is obvious that the meaning of names is essential for effective meaning interpretation of names which could be further analysed nominally. Additionally, semantics is important to sociolinguistics because culture influences the meaning of words. This is the reason why terms differ according to socio-cultural and linguistic setting. For instance, the meaning of terms such as kinship and colour expressions between English and Igbo language speakers differ in usage. In Igbo language for instance, the basic colours are ọchá (white) and ọjí (black). But in English, accommodation is made for other related colours found in human skin according to geographical locations. In reality, skin colours are not just made up of two colours, there are different types of skin colour such as middle brown often called mulatto, fair skinned, pale skinned, black skinned and very light skinned. But these differences in colour are not captured in Igbo personal names as can be seen in the names below:

2) Name

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Nwóké ọchá</td>
<td>‘fair boy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boy white</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Èke ọchá</td>
<td>‘white market day’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>market day white</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Nwányí ányánwụ</td>
<td>‘morning star’ which signifies a fair woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman star</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Ñné ọchá</td>
<td>‘a mother that is fair in complexion’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother fair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the names above, it is apparent that Igbo names only capture ọchá ‘white’ while other colours are not of great importance in naming. Additionally, in understanding the origin and history of a word, the meaning of such word is studied. But in reality, in studying the meanings of words, it would be observed that some etymology of words has either become
outdated or different from the present meaning. This phenomenon would be observed in some typical Awka personal names which have become outdated as listed below:

3) **Name**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ñwá álō</td>
<td>‘a child born during the Alo feast festival’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ñwá njá</td>
<td>‘a child born during the feast of Nja’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ñwá fíjé ñkwụ</td>
<td>‘a child born during the feast of journey festival ñkwụ’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ñwá òsú òfvufè</td>
<td>‘child dedicated to the god of outcast ofvufè’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ñwá imōkā</td>
<td>‘child of the god of Imoka’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The names above are derived from traditional Awka gods, however, the etymology of these names and their cultural undertones have become outdated and irrelevant in the present day Awka. Nevertheless, Imoka’s etymology and festival are still relevant and practised in Awka. From the names above, it is important to further discuss theories of meaning which would help any onomastic work for proper semantic classification and analysis. The theories are:

- a) Referential theory
- b) The mentalist theory
- c) Ideational theory
- d) Behaviourism theory
- e) Associative or Connotative theory

**Referential Theory**

The referential theory believes that words are not just names and labels that ‘stand for’ or represent some objects in the real world because there is a connection between the words or expressions and their referents through the process of thought, (Anagbogu, Eme and Mbah, 2010). This theory of meaning is important in the study of Igbo names, because it is believed that Igbo names have underlying meanings and are not mere tags. An Igbo name could be used to describe the culture of the people, tell a story about the circumstances surrounding the birth of a child or even describe the philosophy of the people. Examples of such names are listed below:

4) **Cultural names**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ñwá álūshī</td>
<td>‘child of deity’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ñwá ọ́zō</td>
<td>‘a child of ozo titled man’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
c) Ñwá ójí - ‘child of kolanut’
child kolanut

d) Àní kpè - ‘let the land judge’
land judge

Names that depict the Circumstances surrounding the Birth of a Child
Names under this category could reflect the circumstances of the bearer’s conception, manner, period, time or even place of birth. Examples are listed below:

5) Names

a) Ñwá ìtúlú - ‘a child born in the bush’
child bush

b) Nwâ dú ijè - ‘a child born during a journey’
child for travelling

c) Mmô nyèlù - ‘a child got from sacrifices and spirit’
spirit gave

From the above descriptions, it is obvious that Igbo names are not mere tags but critics believe that even though the theory works well with nouns, it would not be able to cater adequately for those qualities of nouns which may not have physical referents hence the introduction of the mentalist theory.

The Mentalist Theory
According to O’Grady (1996), meaning is something that exists in the mind rather than in the world. In other words, meaning is represented in the mind in form of a picture. It recognizes meaning as being denotative, that is the dictionary meaning of a word. It has to do with classification or grouping of words in line with some observable characteristics. For example, Igbo personal names are grouped based on observable characteristics. The names are listed below:

Names Relating to Man’s Relationship with Man
Man’s relationship with man could be good, sour, or bad. Man also has to contend with enemies. Examples are:

6) Name

a) Àrú ùtō - ‘love for one another’
body sweetness

b) Ékwù tōsì - ‘stop running me down’
NEG- talk criticize

c) Àmáshi ìló - ‘All enemies are not known’
NEG- know enemies
Names Relating to Belief in Male Succession

Igbo people believe so much in continuity of life. This belief is captured in the names given to Igbo children; such as:

7) **Names**
   a) Ọ̀bú ̀ádànà - ‘may my lineage not fall’
   b) Ñwà jì ̀óbú - ‘child is the custodian of the lineage’
   c) Ọbú ̀éfvùnè - ‘let the lineage not be lost’

For the analysis of place names in chapter four, Mencken’s classification model was used even though some modifications were made. Some meanings are also got from ideas as would be seen in ideational theory.

**Ideational Theory of Meaning**

Ozumba (2004) posits that meaning is a sensible mark of ideas in the mind which is the proper and immediate signification of the corresponding words. In other words, ideational theory of meaning is believed to be meaning which originates in the mind of a speaker in the form of ideas. For instance, the motive behind some naming in Igbo land is based on ideas. Names in the category below are clearly expectations of the name giver from the child. The names are:

8) **Name**
   a) Ágú mmàdù - ‘a powerful human being’
   b) Òkóló ùdò - ‘a man of peace’
   c) Ífé àtù - ‘an exemplary thing or event’

Some names which are ideational may be too vague to comprehend hence the introduction of behaviourism theory of meaning.

**Behaviourism Theory of Meaning**

This theory has to do with the belief that meaning should be assigned based on observable behaviour of people rather than the mental state which could be through imitation and reinforcement (cf. Skinner, 1938). Therefore, language is a learned behaviour; in other words, the theory is concerned with observable reaction words may likely cause hearers to exhibit. Example of Awka personal names depict the behaviour of the people:

9) **Names**
   a) Ézí ̀ómùmè - ‘good behaviour’
b) Ókwú ikê - ‘harsh words bring problem’
   words harsh

c) Ézí nnê - ‘good mother’
   good mother

d) Ézí áhà - ‘good name is better than riches’
   good name

However, this theory may not be adequate for generalization of meaning because some hearers may pretend not to understand the speaker or a name bearer may behave contrarily to the meaning of the name. Therefore, meaning should be further defined as it relates to connotation.

**Associative or Connotative Meaning**

Connotative meaning is the extended meaning given to a word. Associative meaning is often unstable. It could be culturally and socially defined. Therefore, associative meaning could be seen as an underlying meaning attached to a word. In Nigeria, there are some words which are associated with certain attributes and meanings. Consider the words:

**Long legs** - he has ‘long legs’ connotes being highly connected

**Big boy** - he is a ‘big boy’ in Abuja connotes that he is a wealthy young man

**Fine boy** - connotes that one is an extremely handsome young man

**Broke** - he is ‘broke’ connotes that one is cash strapped?

This phenomenon can be replicated in Igbo personal names. Examples are:

**Name**

a) Ágú jî égbè - ‘a fearless person’
   tiger hold gun

b) Ôdùm - ‘fearless person’
   lion

c) Ényí - ‘a big framed person’
   elephant

The meaning of names could also be got from the feelings and attitudes of the speaker towards the subject of discourse or audience. In other words, the speaker’s choice of words can convey feelings which could be positive or negative. Examples in English words are love, happiness, husband, wife e.t.c. give the impression of endearment. Examples of such words found in Igbo personal names are listed below:

**Name**

a) Êfũnányá - ‘love’

b) Ánụrịkà - ‘happiness is the ultimate’

c) Ôbinnà - ‘father’s heart’
Conclusion
The study has presented a detailed discussion on meaning using names. The various theories used to extract meanings of names support the claim by other scholars that meaning of meaning is complex. The study reveals that for any semantic work on onomastics to be done, various theories should be used because names encompass all the facets of the Igbo man’s world.

References


**Bio-data**

**Dr. Ifeoma Udoye**

Dr. Ifeoma Emmanuela Udoye is a lecturer in the Department of English, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University. She earned her PhD in Linguistics from Nasarawa State University, Keffi with a thesis on Onomastics. Her research interests include Onomastics, Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics.