Asymmetrical Reduction in Abureni Address Terms: Politeness, Hierarchy, and Social Ingenuity

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Abstract
This paper examines asymmetrical phonological reduction in Abureni address terms, focusing on clipping and weakening as culturally grounded strategies for indexing hierarchy and respect. The analysis is anchored in Abureni norms of seniority, kinship, and social alignment, in which appropriate forms of address are central to the enactment of personhood and communal order. The findings show that younger speakers systematically employ reduced or softened phonological forms when addressing elders, whereas seniors retain fuller and more phonologically salient forms. This unidirectional pattern encodes deference rather than intimacy, embedding local ideologies of age, authority, and moral standing in everyday interaction. Clipping truncates lexical material, while weakening involves lenition processes shaped by sonority and articulatory ease, producing acoustically gentler forms that are socially ratified as respectful. Data are drawn from naturalistic speech, semi-structured interviews, and kinship-centered exchanges across generations, and are qualitatively analyzed to link morphophonemic processes with pragmatic and sociocultural meanings. Comparative evidence from African languages such as Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and Zulu, as well as from other culturally embedded address systems, situates Abureni within

wider cross-linguistic tendencies while highlighting the distinctiveness of its asymmetrical reductions. The study demonstrates how Abureni speakers creatively mobilize phonology as a semiotic resource to negotiate hierarchy, respect, and social cohesion, underscoring the importance of culturally specific approaches to address terms.

Keywords: Abureni, address terms, cultural specificity, asymmetrical phonological reduction, hierarchy, phonological weakening

1. Introduction

Language is more than a medium of communication; it is a living repository of cultural memory and social order. Through its sounds, structures, and meanings, language transmits social values such as respect, hierarchy, reciprocity, and solidarity (cf. Nwoye, 1992). In this sense, it functions simultaneously as an interactional tool and a cultural text – one that encodes worldviews, social norms, and collective identity (cf. Obeng, 1999; Akinnaso, 1980).

Naming, in particular, constitutes one of the most enduring ways through which language embodies these social values. Across African societies, personal names situate individuals within kinship networks, commemorate historical events, express aspirations, and affirm communal belonging. As such, names serve as narrative artefacts that link the personal to the ancestral and the individual to the collective, simultaneously indexing social position, relational obligations, and cultural ideals.

In Abureni, as this study demonstrates for the first time, the reduction, reshaping, or selective use of personal names performs crucial roles in signalling respect, mitigating imposition, and aligning with hierarchical expectations within interactional contexts. Linguistic form here operates as a semiotic resource for

indexing interpersonal stance, generational distance, solidarity, and social propriety. To the best of the authors' knowledge, scholarship on the Abureni language is fairly recent, with the majority of studies emerging only in the last decade (e.g., Etire 2015, 2016, 2017; Etire & Patience 2021; Paul et al., 2023). Earlier works have focused primarily on orthography, numerals, wordlists, and general descriptive or sociolinguistic documentation. Even where kinship and address expressions are mentioned (Akari, 2014; Ebua, 2017; Etire, 2023), the emphasis has remained on lexical listing rather than interactional usage or pragmatic function.

Importantly, these studies do not examine how clipping, truncation, and mimicking of personal names participate in the negotiation of social relations. For instance, Etire (2015, 2023) documents kinship nomenclature and short forms such as abọ for ọyọbọ 'uncle' and ama for ọyọmanị 'aunt', but stops short of analysing how such forms are mobilized pragmatically in real discourse. Similarly, Akari (2014) and Daniel (2017) reference names of elders, family terms, and greetings without extending their analyses to honorificity or hierarchical address practice. Work on Abureni phonology and naming patterns (Etire 2015) has further highlighted structural tendencies such as vowel-initial names, yet clipping, mimicking, and their sociolinguistic meanings remain unexplored.

This study therefore fills a substantive gap by foregrounding how name forms are culturally deployed in Abureni conversations, particularly in interactions between youths and elders. It shows that naming practices are not merely lexical but encode culturally specific ideologies of age, respect, and hierarchy – features that can only be understood through an ethnographically grounded,

Africa-centered sociolinguistics attentive to local norms rather than universalist models.

1.1 Abureni in the Niger Delta: People, Language, and Setting

Abureni (Glottolog: abur1244; ISO 639-3: mgj) is spoken in the riverine communities of Bayelsa and Rivers States, especially along the upper tributaries of the Santa Barbara River, by roughly 8,000 speakers (Etire 2015b). Social life in these small fishing and farming settlements is organized around kinship, seniority, and mutual obligations.

Linguistically, Abureni belongs to the Central Delta subgroup of Niger-Congo, forming an older branch of East Benue-Congo (Faraclas 1989; Connell et al. 2015; Kari 2019). Dialectal variation is modest, and Abureni is closely associated with Kugbo, with both varieties sharing an orthography (Etire 2015a). Cultural institutions and community structures support the maintenance of language and identity (Daniel 2017).

Within this cultural ecology, personal and kinship names carry rich social meaning. Their phonological form – whether reduced, softened, or fully articulated – signals hierarchy, relational closeness, and situational appropriateness. This study provides the first detailed linguistic analysis of how Abureni naming practices function both socially and phonologically.In Section 3, the study examines these patterns in detail, showing how Abureni speakers employ clipping, nativization, and phonological adaptation as culturally specific strategies to negotiate social stance, respect, and relational alignment.

Figure 1: Map showing the communities of The Abureni people
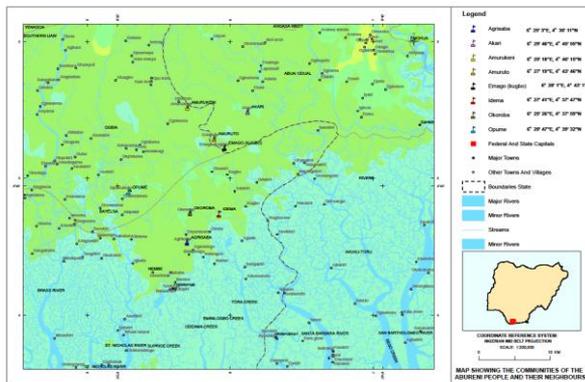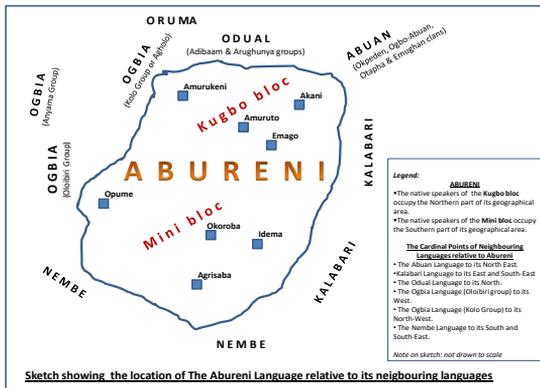and their neighbours in Bayelsa State and Rivers State of Nigeria.

Figure 2: Sketch showing the location of the Abureni Language
speaking communities and their neighbours.

Source © 2015b Daniami Etire; The Orthography of the Abureni
Language

1.2 Rethinking Universality in Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory has long framed address terms as strategic mechanisms for managing face. However, its assumed universality has been substantially challenged by research showing that politeness is culturally constituted. Work on Japanese and East Asian politeness (Matsumoto 1988; Ide 1989) demonstrates that politeness often derives from socially prescribed norms rather than individual strategic redress of face-threatening acts. Parallel critiques have emerged from African pragmatics. Nwoye (1992), working with Igbo, argues that Brown and Levinson's essentially individualistic conception of face does not capture African communal orientations in which group harmony, obligation, and respect for age and status are central to interaction. Studies of Akan and other West African languages (Agyekum 2004; Obeng 1999) further show that address terms are embedded in culturally specific honorific systems, kinship structures, and age hierarchies, functioning as social indexing devices rather than simply politeness strategies. These findings converge with relational and discursive approaches (Locher & Watts 2005; Watts 2003), which view politeness as locally negotiated within particular moral and cultural orders. For Abureni, therefore, an adequate account of address terms must prioritise cultural specificity, grounding analysis in indigenous norms of personhood, respect, seniority, and social identity. Address terms in Abureni are best understood not as instantiations of universal politeness strategies but as culturally meaningful resources through which speakers enact locally valued relationships and social alignments.

1.3 Naming Practices as Social Semiotics: Clipping and Name-Mimicking

Abureni naming practices demonstrate how morphophonemic adaptation functions as a vehicle for culturally grounded social meaning. Two strategies are particularly salient. **Clipping** involves the selective reduction of syllables in personal or kinship names, while **name-mimicking** entails subtle phonological reshaping to signal respect, recognition, or intimacy. These strategies are **culturally patterned and interactionally regulated**, reflecting local norms of hierarchy, age-based seniority, and communal obligations. Rather than adhering to universalist notions of politeness, these practices are embedded within Abureni social logic: they mediate relational expectations, mark deference, and negotiate social distance according to community-specific ideologies. Through these patterned forms, Abureni speakers transform phonological structures into a semiotic toolkit for indexing hierarchy, generational roles, and interpersonal stance, demonstrating the intimate link between linguistic form and culturally defined social practice.[1]

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[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 36th Conference of the Linguistics Association of Nigeria (CLAN), Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), Awka, Anambra State, 21–25 October 2025. The authors sincerely appreciate the valuable feedback provided by the anonymous reviewers.

Abureni also fits into a broader cross-linguistic typology. Japanese diminutives (-*chan*, -*kun*; Sawada, 2011; Mangga, 2015) and Zulu solidarity naming (Madondo, 2020) demonstrate that phonological reshaping can index intimacy, hierarchy, or in-group membership. Within Nigeria, Yoruba truncation (Ikotun, 2010), Hausa reductions (Shehu, 2015), Igbo clipping (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2013), and Urhobo shortening (Oyiborhoro, 2005; Aziza, 2007) similarly show socially motivated phonological adaptation.

Unlike these cases, Abureni uniquely employs **phonological weakening to signal deference**, not informality – a system that has not previously been documented.

1.4 Address Terms, Politeness, and Morphophonemic Adaptation

Address terms (including personal names, kinship expressions, titles, honorifics, pet forms, and clipped variants) serve as central resources for encoding respect, social hierarchy, and intimacy within specific cultural contexts (Braun, 1988; Fasold, 1990; Dickey, 1997). In Abureni, address forms are shaped by community-specific norms that encode age, seniority, and relational obligations, rather than adhering to universalist notions of politeness. Section 3 explores how speakers strategically select, reduce, and reshape these forms to signal deference and negotiate culturally defined social stances, illustrating how phonological and morphophonemic patterns operate as semiotic tools imbued with locally meaningful social and hierarchical significance.

Recent African studies reinforce the connection between morphology, phonology, and politeness: Gibson, Marten, and Ndlovu (2024) show that clipping and affixation in African Urban

Youth Languages function as politeness strategies; Alphonce (2024) and Magashi (2024) document address term use to signal hierarchy in East African languages; Wahyuni et al. (2024) highlight institutional politeness in forms such as *Sir* and *Madam*; and Bayo, Alphonce, and Magashi (2025) illustrate how Iraqw greetings differentiate respect, intimacy, kinship, identity, and distance.

Placed within this scholarship, Abureni offers a particularly revealing case: **politeness is phonologically enacted**, with clipping, lenition, and segmental weakening serving as tools for younger speakers to signal deference toward seniors. Unlike Yoruba or Hausa, where reduction often expresses informality, Abureni reductions are asymmetrically oriented, highlighting respect rather than solidarity.

1.5 Structure, Rationale, and Research Questions

Despite the broader typological and national literature on phonologically encoded social meaning, Abureni has **not received substantive linguistic description**. A Google search shows a dearth of study analyzing the morphophonemic mechanisms underlying clipping, lenition, and name-mimicking, or their pragmatic and hierarchical motivations.

This study addresses this gap. Specifically, it investigates:

1. Which morphophonemic processes shape the formation of clipped and mimicked address forms in Abureni?
2. In what ways do these phonologically reduced forms index hierarchy, respect, familiarity, or affective stance in interaction?
3. How does the Abureni system compare with Nigerian and global cases of phonologically encoded politeness?

The paper is organized as follows: Section 1 is the introduction that discusses basic ethnolinguistic information on Abureni and reviews address terms, phonological simplification, and morphophonemic adaptation, situating Abureni within Nigerian and cross-linguistic contexts. Section 2 outlines methods. Section 3 presents and analyzes Abureni data on clipping and lenition, showing how these processes encode hierarchy, affect, and social stance. Section 4 concludes with implications for African linguistics and cross-linguistic phonologies of politeness.

2. Methodology
This study used **ChatGPT (GPT-5 Mini)** for language refinement and reference management. All outputs were critically verified by the authors. No AI-generated tables, figures, or data arrays were used.

2.1 Research Design
This study employs a qualitative ethnophonological design, combining phonological analysis with ethnographic observation to examine structural processes in Abureni address-term reduction and their social-pragmatic functions.

2.2 Data Collection
Data were collected between January and July 2025 from two Abureni-speaking communities in Ogbia LGA, Bayelsa State, and were supplemented with diaspora interactions conducted via WhatsApp and video calls in Lagos, Port Harcourt, and London. The corpus comprises 120 instances of name-mimicking drawn from 18 participants (10 women, 8 men) aged 9–72, encompassing

both adult–child and peer–peer interactions. Verbal consent was obtained in accordance with local norms of phatic interaction.

2.3 Elicitation Methods

Three complementary techniques were used: **narrative prompts which** involved storytelling sessions eliciting naturalistic use of address terms; **direct elicitation**of the production of shortened forms with commentary on social appropriateness; and **metapragmatic interviews for** reflections on polite versus intimate sound shifts, generational asymmetries, and social meaning.

Participant observation and introspective data from the first author (a native speaker) supplemented these methods. Preliminary analyses were reviewed by three senior consultants for cultural and semantic accuracy.

2.4 Analytical Framework

A sociophonetic approach was adopted to examine lenition, clipping, and segmental substitution as both phonological processes and socially meaningful resources. Comparative evidence situates Abureni patterns within wider cross-linguistic practices. Japanese diminutive suffixes such as *-chan* and *-kun* index intimacy and solidarity (Sawada, 2011; Mangga, 2015), while Zulu solidarity naming similarly marks in-group affiliation (Madondo, 2020). East African languages, including Iraqw and Sukuma, display age- and hierarchy-based asymmetries in address-term modification (Alphonce 2024; Magashi 2024; Bayo, Alphonce & Magashi 2025). Nigerian languages provide additional parallels: Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and Urhobo employ phonological

reduction to signal familiarity and solidarity (Ikotun, 2010; Shehu, 2015; Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2013; Oyiborhoro, 2005; Aziza, 2007). Typologies of lenition (Honeybone, 2008; Lass, 1984) guided the analysis of segmental weakening, sonority shifts, and phonological softening as semiotic resources. This framework highlights Abureni address-term reduction as a culturally patterned mechanism encoding hierarchy, deference, and relational stance.

3. Results and Discussion: Morphophonemic Processes in Abureni Address Terms

In Abureni, clipping and phonological weakening are the primary morphophonemic strategies shaping address terms, particularly in personal and kinship naming. These structural reductions are systematically tied to social meanings, showing how phonology encodes culturally embedded hierarchies, relational norms, and affective stance.

3.1 Clipping in Abureni Address Terms
Clipping in Abureni is a structured morphological process rather than arbitrary abbreviation. It occurs across indigenous names, loan names, and kinship/social terms, serving pragmatic and affective purposes by signaling respect, deference, or intimacy within interactions.

3.1.1 Indigenous Personal Names
The data in Table 1 illustrate that Abureni speakers systematically employ clipping and reduplication simplification as socially meaningful strategies. Initial and final clipping preserve the phonological core of names while signaling deference, particularly in interactions with elders or socially senior individuals.

Reduplication simplification, on the other hand, often maintains familiarity among peers while still allowing respectful use in hierarchical contexts.

Table 1: Clipping in Indigenous Abureni Personal Names

Full Form	Clipped Form	Type of Clipping	Social Use of Full Form	Social Use of Clipped Form
Eḍoghotu / èḍòɣótù/	*Otu* /ótù/	Initial	Used by peers and younger relations	Respectful address to elders
Oṇiṇotoḍo / ɔ̀nínɔ̀tɔ́dɔ̃/	*Otoḍo* / ɔ̀tɔ́dɔ̃/	Initial	Peer and younger interlocutor	Respectful or formal address
Aḍieba / àɗíébə̀/	*Aba* /ábə̀/	Medial	Used by equals and intimates	Deferential or polite
Oḡiga / ɔ̀gìgà/	*Oga* /ɔ̀gà/	Medial	Peer and domestic address to younger persons	Respectful or honorific use
Abiḇo / àbíɓɔ̀/	*Abi* /àbí/	Final	Friendly or informal address by members of same age grade	Deferential address to elders
Oguru / òɡùrù/	*Ogu* /òɡù/	Final	Familiar/peer use	Respectful address to elders
Mimi	*Mi*	Reduplication Simplification	Familiar/peer use	Respectful address to elders
Ikokonikokoni	Ikoni	Reduplication Simplification	Familiar/peer use	Respectful address to elders

Three principal clipping strategies are observed: initial clipping, medial/final truncation, and reduplication simplification (e.g., *Mimi → Mi*, *Ọkorikori → Ọkori*). Initial and final clipping dominate, preserving prosodic cores and reflecting articulatory economy. Full forms occur in peer or neutral reference, whereas clipped forms index deference. Unlike Yoruba or the other languages surveyed, reduction in Abureni signals respect rather than familiarity.

3.1.2 Loan Names
The patterns in Table 2 show that nativized loan names in Abureni are integrated into the language's phonological and social system while retaining culturally meaningful functions.

Table 2: Clipping in Nativized Abureni Personal Names

Source Language	Original Form	Nativized Form	Clipped Form	Social Use of Full Form	Social Use of Clipped Form
Kalabari	*Igonibọ*	*Igoinybọ*	*Igoiny /ígòîŋ/*	Used among peers and familiar	Used by younger speakers to elders or respected persons
English	*Franklin*	*Afrakilini*	*Okilin /ókìlîn/*	Informal or domestic contexts	Respectful or socially cautious usage
English	*Mercy*	*Amẹsị*	*Ẹsị /ésì/*	Familiar or intimate contexts	Polite or formal address
Nembe	*Ọbụta*	*Ọbụta*	*Ọta /ɔ́tá/*	Used by equals or in family domains	Used deferentially toward seniors

Loan names in Abureni are nativized through **vowel harmony, consonant substitution**, or **syllable restructuring**, often followed by **clipping** (e.g., *Amẹsi → Ẹsi, Afrakilini → Okilin*). These adaptations integrate the names into Abureni phonology while encoding social relationships: full forms occur among peers or in informal contexts, whereas clipped forms signal **deference, respect, or caution** toward elders and socially senior individuals. The patterns mirror those observed with indigenous names, showing that both native and borrowed forms are governed by the same **culturally specific semiotic principles**, reinforcing hierarchy, social stance, and community norms.

3.1.3 Kinship and Social Terms

Kinship terms (*ọyọbọ* 'uncle', *ọyọmanị* 'aunt') are truncated (*abọ, ama*) in direct address, encoding hierarchy and relational stance, while full forms are reserved for reported or third-person reference. Interaction examples illustrate that clipping is strategically deployed to manage politeness, deference, and affective alignment.

Table 3: Clipping in Abureni Kinship and Social Terms

Full Form	Meaning	Clipped Form	Social Use of Full Form	Social Use of Clipped Form
ọwẹdẹ /ɔ̀wɛ̀dɛ̀/ (*ada /ádà/*)	'father'	–	*ọwẹdẹ* is the formal reference; *ada* used only in address	–
ọnweni /ònwⁿènì/ (*aya /ájà/*)	'mother'	–	*ọnweni* is the formal reference; *aya* used only in	–

			address	
o̱yo̱bo̱ /ɔ̀yɔ̀bɔ̀/	'uncle'	abo̱ /àbɔ̀/	Report/Generic reference	Polite address to elder male
oyo̱mani̱ /ɔ̀yɔ̀mánì/	'aunt'	ama /àmá/	Report/Generic reference	Deferential address to elder female
anyegia̱ /ə̀ɲégíə̂/	'cousin'	–	Peer and family use	–
Umor /ùmòr/	'brother'	–	Informal among peers	–
o̱nyani̱ /ɔ̀ɲánì/	'daughter'	–	Referential use only	–
oyo̱go /ɔ̀jɔ́gɔ̀/	'in-law'	ogo̱ /ɔ́gɔ̀/	Report/Generic reference	Respectful address to in-laws
okei /òkéî/	'elder'	–	Honorific title	–

Across Abureni personal, kinship, and loan names, **clipping and phonological adaptation**serve as culturally grounded strategies for marking social relationships. Full forms are generally used among peers, in informal contexts, or in reported reference, while clipped forms signal **deference, respect, and hierarchical stance** toward elders and socially senior individuals. This pattern demonstrates that both indigenous and borrowed names are shaped by the same culturally specific semiotic norms, highlighting how Abureni speakers use phonological form to negotiate hierarchy, social stance, and relational alignment within the community.

3.1.4 Interactional Contexts of Address Terms Usage

Clipped forms are used in direct address, while full forms occur in reported or third-person reference, reflecting socially situated politeness, as in the examples of interactional patterns (1-3).

Example 1: Addressing an Uncle Named Etire (Clipped vs. Full Contrast)

Context: A youth meets his uncle for the first time and expresses excitement during their exchange.

a. Full form (neutral report)

Oyo̱bo̱	dami̱	odi	ma	i̱sẹn
uncle	1SG.POSS	be.PRS	DEF	here

'My uncle is here.'

b. Clipped form (direct address)

Abo̱,	adien	doyom	ka	ubhelegi	eka?
uncle	name2SG		what	3SG.PRS.call	how

'Uncle, what is your name?'

c. Response I (full form)

Adien	dami	ubhelegi	ma	Etire
name1SG		3SG.PRS.call	DEF	Etire

'My nameis Etire.'

d. Response II (softened form)

Ami	Abo̱	Etiye
1SG	uncle	Etire

'I am Uncle Etire.'

e. Greeting (softened form)

Abo̱	Etiye	anwa	na̱	a̱ru!

uncle   Etire   2SG   PRF.be come
'Uncle Etire, you are welcome!'

f. Continuation: Reintroduction of Actual Name

Yaa,   agai   adien   dami   ubhelegi ma   Etire
But   truly   name   1SG   3SG.PRS.call   DEF
        Etire

But my real name is Etire.

In the interaction sequence, the uncle first adopts the softened response *Ami Abọ Etiye* 'I am Uncle Etire' (1d) to model culturally appropriate address behaviour, foregrounding kinship and deference over lexical precision. This utterance sets the pragmatic frame for politeness, prompting a follow-up with (1f) as a natural continuation. The exchange performs both a didactic and relational function, socializing the younger participant into local norms of respectful address through linguistic example. When the youth reciprocates with the softened greeting *Abọ Etiye anwa nạ ạru!* 'Uncle Etire, you are welcome!' (1e), the interaction proceeds smoothly, with deference firmly established. At this point, the uncle may shift register to clarify his actual name using the full form, as in (1f): *Yaa, agai adien dami ubhelegi ma Etire* 'But my real name is Etire'. This pragmatic shift marks the resolution of the social negotiation: once hierarchy and respect have been linguistically indexed, the communicative space allows for lexical precision. The Abureni system thus demonstrates that phonological reduction, particularly clipping and kin incorporation, is not a casual phonetic tendency but an interactionally strategic resource for enacting social hierarchy and relational harmony.

Example 2: Welcoming Mother (Clipped vs. Full Contrast)
a. Direct address (intimate–respectful)

Aya, na̱ a̱ru!
mother PRF.be come
'Mother, welcome!'

The clipped form *Aya* expresses both warmth and deference within the kin dyad.

b. Reported reference (third-person mention)

Onweni dami o̱di ma̱ i̱se̱n
mother 1SG.POSS be.PRS DEF here
'My mother is here.'

Here, *Onweni* (full form) is used in third-person reference rather than in relational address.

Example 3. Greeting an In-law (Clipped vs. Full Contrast)
a. Direct greeting

Ogo̱, na̱ a̱ru!
in-lawPRF.become
'In-law,welcome!'

b. Reported mention

O̱yo̱go̱ da̱mi̱ o̱di ma̱ i̱se̱n
in-law 1SG.POSS be.PRS DEF here
'My in-law is here.'

The clipped form *Ogo̱* performs polite address and deference, whereas *O̱yo̱go̱* (full form) occurs only in descriptive reference.

These examples show that **Abureni employs a moralized speech economy**: morphological compression and phonological attenuation jointly encode hierarchy, kinship relations, and relational propriety. In Abureni, phonological simplification in

personal names is a culturally sanctioned strategy used by younger speakers to address elders. These modifications, analogous to morphological clipping, signal hierarchical deference rather than mockery. Elders retain the canonical forms, producing an asymmetric pattern: juniors soften or reduce, while peers and seniors do not reciprocate, as shown in the illustrative examples (4-5).

Example 4: Addressing Elder A̱seki (Softened vs. Basic Form)
a. Younger speaker (softened–respectful – /s/ → /t/, /k/ → /t/):
Abo̱   A̱teti   na̱   ḏaken?
Uncle   Aseki   PROG where
'Where is Uncle A̱seki going?'
b. Elder (Full Form Retained):
A̱seki   na̱   ḏaken?
Aseki   PROG where
'Where is A̱seki going?'
Example 5: Direct Address Between Name Twins called *Ogberima̱* (Softened vs. Basic Form)
a. Younger woman (softened–respectful – Clipping +/gb/ → /ɓ/):
O̱beya̱ na̱   a̱ba̱l   e
O̱beya̱ PRF   3SG.PRS.dawn   INT
 'Good morning, Ogberima'
b. Elderly woman (Canonical Form Retained):
Yii   na̱   a̱ba̱l   Ogberima   a̱gogo ḏami̱
Yes   PRF   3SG.PRS.dawn   Ogberima   namesake
        my
'Good morning Ogberima, my namesake'
Among peers, phonological simplification is absent, reflecting the hierarchical function of these alternations.

3.2 Phonological Simplification in Abureni

Phonological simplifications mirror **child speech patterns** (Honeybone 2008), highlighting the interaction of articulatory ease and social signaling. These processes produce softened, dimunitive, and polite forms that index respect, affective alignment, and social hierarchy. Phonological simplifications in Abureni include lenition, segmental substitution, and syllable reduction. Processes observed include:

a. Velar fronting: /k/ → /t/, /g/ → /d/
b. Fricative → stop: /s/ → /t/
c. Labial-velar → implosive: /gb, kp/ → /ɓ/
d. Nasal → glide: /m/ → /w/ or /j/
e. Liquid shifts: /r, l/ → /j/ or /w/

These yield softened, polite forms used by juniors toward elders (Tables 4 and Examples 4–5). Phonological simplification aligns with morphological clipping, producing semiotic forms of deference.

Table 4: Phonological Simplification in Abureni Personal Names

Simplification Rule	Example Forms	Simplified Forms
gb → ɓ	Igbono Ogberima Ugbiani	Iɓo Oɓeya Uɓa
kp → ɓ	Okpeti Ologinokpo Okpokpo	Oɓeti Oɓo Oɓoɓo
β → m	**B**eba	**M**ema
ɣ → j	Ediɣoman Ikiɣha Okiɣe	Eyoman Ayoya Otiye

ɣ → w	A̱ɣu̱du̱m I̱ɣuma̱n O̱ɣo̱ɣo̱	A̱wu̱du̱m Iwuma̱m O̱wo̱
m → w	Ama	Awa
l → j	A̱su̱la̱ O̱pe̱le̱m O̱lami̱	A̱suya̱ O̱pe̱ye̱m O̱yami̱
r → j	A̱ko̱ru Eti̱re O̱tari̱	A̱koyu Etiye O̱tayi̱
r → w	Oru̱ene Iru̱aro̱	Owene Iwu̱ayo
s → t	A̱sa̱ko A̱so̱logi	A̱ta̱to; A̱to̱di
k → t	A̱seki̱ O̱ki̱ghe̱	A̱seti̱ O̱ti̱ye̱
g → d	O̱gi̱ga A̱so̱logi Olo̱gi̱ba	O̱di̱da A̱to̱di Odi̱ba
Syllable Reduction	**Akoribo**	**Kori**
Syllable Reduction in Reduplication	**O̱gaga** **Ogodogodo** **Mimi**	**O̱ga** **Ogodo** **Mi**

3.3 Discussion: Cross-Linguistic Comparisons and Uniqueness
3.3.1 Symmetrical vs. Asymmetrical Patterns

In many languages, unidirectional phonological adaptation flows downward: elders shorten or soften forms toward juniors, signaling familiarity, guidance, or care. Examples include Yoruba, Hausa, and other Nigerian languages, as well as East African languages (Iraqw, Sukuma) where hierarchical or institutionalized honorific forms are partially unidirectional (cf. Alphonce, 2024; Magashi, 2024; Bayo, Alphonce & Magashi, 2025).

Abureni shows a unique upward asymmetry: shortened, softened, or clipped forms are used exclusively by juniors toward elders, never reciprocated. Full forms are preserved for neutral or third-person reference, while softened forms encode respect, hierarchy, and relational propriety.

3.3.2 Cross-Linguistic Parallels

Japanese diminutives (-chan/-kun) and Zulu solidarity naming involve phonological softening or truncation, typically conveying solidarity, endearment, or familiarity, and may be bidirectional (Sawada, 2011; Mangga, 2015; Madondo, 2020). In similar vein, Nigerian languages like Yoruba (Ikotun, 2010), Hausa (Shehu, 2015), Igbo (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2013), and Urhobo (Oyiborhoro, 2005) employ truncation or reduction largely to express familiarity or solidarity, with occasional downward asymmetry.

By contrast, Abureni's reduction functions strictly upward, marking deference rather than intimacy. This pattern is a rare instance of phonological politeness entirely oriented from junior to senior, setting it apart in the global typology of address-term modification.

3.3.3 Functional and Social Implications

Abureni demonstrates that phonology itself is a semiotic resource, systematically encoding hierarchy, kinship obligations, and affective stance. The combination of morphological clipping and phonological weakening creates a structured, morally encoded speech economy, where articulatory economy intersects with social norms.

Such asymmetric, upward-only patterns are largely undocumented elsewhere, highlighting Abureni's distinctive contribution to the

study of cross-linguistic politeness, phonology, and naming systems.

4. Conclusion

Phonological shifts in Abureni address terms illustrate culturally regulated strategies for signaling respect, hierarchy, and relational stance. Younger speakers systematically use clipped, softened, or weakened forms when addressing elders, while peers and seniors retain full forms, producing a **unidirectional asymmetry**. This contrasts with Yoruba, where truncation often signals informality (Ikotun, 2010), and Hausa, where vowel reduction or consonant weakening indexes familiarity (Shehu, 2015).

Cross-linguistic parallels, including Japanese diminutives (Sawada, 2011; Mangga, 2015), Zulu solidarity naming (Madondo, 2020), and East African honorifics (Alphonce, 2024), demonstrate the semiotic potential of phonological reduction. Yet Abureni is distinctive: reduction flows exclusively from juniors to seniors, signaling **deference rather than familiarity or solidarity**.

These patterns show that phonological variation is a **culturally specific semiotic resource**, mediating hierarchy, sustaining intergenerational norms, and embedding social order. By combining phonological, morphological, and ethnographic analysis, the study highlights the value of **culture-specific theoretical approaches** that prioritize local norms over universalist assumptions about politeness.

Abureni thus demonstrates how phonology itself can be **strategically patterned to enact social hierarchy**, offering insights for African linguistics and comparative studies of name adaptation, address systems, and the social semiotics of phonology.

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