

## **AN INVESTIGATION INTO ANTHROPONYMS**

### **A Comparative Linguistic Study of Igbo and English Personal Names**

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#### **Abstract**

This study was a comparative analysis of anthroponyms, specifically personal names, in two distinct languages: Igbo and English. Anthroponyms, being an integral aspect of cultural identity and communication, serve as an intriguing focal point for linguistic exploration and cross-cultural understanding. The primary objective of this investigation was to explore the similarities and differences in the formation, structure, semantic features, and cultural significance of personal names in Igbo and English. The research combined qualitative and quantitative techniques so as to understand the linguistic nuances inherent in both naming systems. Through interviews and surveys, data was collected from speakers of Igbo and English. The findings revealed interesting contrasts and similarities between Igbo and English anthroponyms. While English names are typically characterized by words of Germanic, Latin, and Greek influences, Igbo names showcase a more diverse blend of linguistic roots, incorporating Igbo proverbs, history, and spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, it was discovered that there are distinctive patterns in naming conventions, such as the influence of colonial history on the adoption of English names among Igbo communities. Personal names depict the symbolic representations and underlying cultural values associated with naming practices in both languages. Igbo names often embody aspirations, character traits, or historical events, promoting a strong sense of identity and intergenerational connections. On the other hand, English names often convey religious or ancestral significance. The findings highlighted the profound impact of language on shaping individual and communal identities. The researcher recommended that future studies should be carried out in onomastics for further exploration of anthroponyms in other languages and cultures.

**Keywords:** Naming conventions, Onomastics, Anthropology, Semantic Features, Language Diversity

#### **Introduction**

Names play a significant role in human societies, serving as a fundamental aspect of identity and culture. Across different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, personal names hold unique meanings, reflecting the values, beliefs, and history of the communities that bear them. The study of personal names, known as anthroponymy, offers a fascinating glimpse into the intricacies of language, culture, and human interaction. According to Cookey and Ijioma (2019), naming is an important ceremony and every society has a unique way of accomplishing the process. In Igbo society, the majority of indigenous names are not gender sensitive; they are drawn mainly from

situations surrounding the birth of the child or the family. However, the English personal names that abound in Igboland today are the aftermath of colonization and Christianity. Adults even took English names in response to “modernity.” Most of these English names were gender sensitive. One could identify the gender of children by their English names although this has not always been the case in contemporary English naming pattern among the Igbo (17). Essien observed that:

From the very beginning, naming had been an important duty man had to perform not only to distinguish animals from birds but man from man to facilitate linguistic communication. Brothers had to be distinguished from brothers, sisters from sisters and siblings from siblings especially in the ancient days when polygamy and concubines were normal and pro-creation in large numbers was a virtue.

Personal names play a significant role in language and culture, reflecting the beliefs, traditions, and values of a community. Taking a cue from the Bible, a name has more than identification to offer to the bearer. To this, Jason Dulle in his work, *The Biblical Significance of Names* stated:

To the Hebrews a name was not a label, or a tool to distinguish one person from another; a person’s name was viewed as equivalent to the person himself. A person’s name signified their person, worth, character, reputation, authority, will, and ownership. In Revelation 3:4 it is said that there were “a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments.” The reference is to the people in Sardis, but they are called “names.” Many modern translators, understanding the meaning of onoma, simply translate it as “people.” Proverbs says the “name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous run to it and are safe” (Proverbs18:10). Does this mean there is a large tower in the shape of the letters “LORD” that the righteous run into? No. The point is that the Lord Himself is a strong tower. Other Scriptures also confirm the idea that God’s name is equivalent to God’s person.

From the above statement, a name represents in totality the essence of the bearer. Consequently, the meaning of your name is you.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the linguistic patterns and semantic meanings embedded within Igbo and English personal names

2. To identify the cultural and social factors that shape naming practices in Igbo and English cultures.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the linguistic patterns and semantic meanings embedded within Igbo and English personal names?
2. What are the cultural and social factors that shape naming practices in Igbo and English cultures?

### **Research Methodology**

The study was conducted using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Data on Igbo and English personal names was compiled, drawing from various sources such as surveys, interviews, historical records, literary texts, and contemporary name repositories. Each name was analyzed in terms of its phonetic structure, morphological components, and semantic implications. A corpus of Igbo and English personal names was constructed, incorporating diverse texts, historical records, literature, and contemporary sources. The Igbo corpus was sourced from the South Eastern region of Nigeria, while the English corpus included names from diverse English-speaking countries.

Furthermore, interviews and surveys were conducted with speakers of Igbo and English to gather insights into the cultural and social motivations behind name choices. Participants were asked to share the stories, traditions, and personal beliefs associated with their names, providing valuable context for the linguistic analysis.

### **Empirical Studies**

Drawing from the existing literature, this research examined anthroponyms from the point of view of a comparative study of Igbo and English personal names.

Nkamigbo (2019) studied the typology of Igbo names such as family names, occupational names, circumstantial names, market day names, kinship names, honorifics and title names, metaphoric names, etc. Igbo naming systems depict the Igbo culture and philosophy because an indigenous Igbo name identifies the bearer as a member of the Igbo society and carves a space for him/her in the society. In the traditional Igbo society, name givers chose personal names that

reflect their culture. However, the changing modern and religious influences on the land and the people have left their impact on naming patterns. This results in changing naming practices. She studied naming forms and change in Igbo identity within the framework of social and cultural dynamics. The study revealed that names are no longer driven by the traditional Igbo philosophy rather by some external factors like new religions, urbanization and Western philosophy.

Iwundu (1994) attempted a classification of the semantic categories of Igbo names and finds the followings: (i) theophoric (ii) ideational (iii) monumental (iv) testimonial (v) relational (vi) solicitor (vii) admonitory (viii) temporal. Ogie (2002) investigated Edo personal names and argues that they are used to affirm certain aspects of Edo culture. The linguistic aspect of the study divided names into constituent morphological parts to reveal their meanings. Agyekum's (2006) study dealt with naming as an important aspect of the Akan society and looks at Akan names within the pure linguistic anthropology. According to Agyekum, names are not arbitrary labels but sociocultural tags that have socio-cultural functions and meanings.

Emeka-Nwobia (2016) studied the dynamics of onomastics in Afikpo Igbo society. Most importantly, the paper looked at the typology of Afikpo-Igbo personal names. An interesting aspect of the study is the class of names which appear under the category, 'physical appearance'. This class of name, according to her, reflects complexion, size and values. For instance, Okorochoa - fair boy (male); Ojii - dark complexioned (female); Ucha - fair complexioned (female); Ugo - eagle (a beautiful bird); Ola edo - gold (a valuable jewel); Mma – beauty.

From the empirical studies reviewed, the researcher discovered that there has not been a comparative linguistic study of Igbo and English personal names done in the past and this forms the gap in knowledge which the present study has come to fill.

## **Data Analysis**

### **1. What are the linguistic patterns and semantic meanings embedded within Igbo and English personal names?**

The linguistic patterns and semantic meanings of Igbo names revealed a deep connection to cultural values, aspirations, and beliefs within the Igbo-speaking communities. There are

phonetic patterns that indicate that both Igbo and English names display diverse phonetic patterns. Igbo names often feature vowel-rich structures and syllabic tonality, while English names exhibit a wider range of consonant clusters and stress variations. Igbo names often carry significant messages, reflecting the parents' hopes for their children, their religious convictions, and their appreciation for positive qualities. The following are linguistic patterns and semantic meanings inherent in Igbo and English personal names:

**Theophoric Elements:** Many Igbo names incorporate theophoric elements, where "Chi" or "Chukwu" (meaning God) is combined with other words to form names with religious connotations. For example, "Chidinma" means "God is good," and "Chiemeka" means "God has done a great thing." Many Igbo names are infused with theophoric elements, incorporating words related to God or spirituality. These names express a strong religious or divine connection. Other examples include: "Chidinma" - "God is good", "Chizaram" - "God answered me", "Chimamanda" - "My God will never fail" and "Chibuzo" - "God is first"

**Repetitions and Reduplication:** Igbo names often employ reduplication or repetition of syllables or sounds for emphasis or to convey specific meanings. For instance, "Chukwunonso" means "God is near," where "Chukwu" (God) is repeated for emphasis. Igbo names often utilize reduplication or repetition of syllables or sounds, creating meaningful and rhythmical names. This linguistic feature is used for emphasis or to convey specific meanings. Examples include: "Nkechinyere" - "Given by God", "Nwanneka" - "My siblings are supreme", "Ugochukwu" - "God's favour", and "Obioma" - "Kind-hearted".

**Noun-Verb Combinations:** Some Igbo names combine nouns and verbs to create meaningful expressions. For example, "Nwabunwanne" means "a sibling is a friend" or "Ugochukwu" means "eagle of God."

**Blessings and Good Wishes:** Several Igbo names express blessings, good wishes, and positive attributes that parents wish for their children. These names often convey hope and positivity. Examples include: "Ifunanya" - "Love", "Chinwendu" - "God owns life", "Udochukwu" - "God's peace" and "Chinaza" - "God answers".

**Attributes and Character Traits:** Many Igbo names are chosen to reflect specific attributes or character traits that parents desire for their children. These names often express positive qualities or commendable virtues. Examples include: "Obinna" - "Father's heart" (referring to a beloved son), "Chinyere" - "God gave" (a child born after a long wait), "Ngozi" - "Blessing", and "Ugochukwu" - "God's glory".

**Gender-Specific Meanings:** Some Igbo names have gender-specific meanings, emphasizing characteristics associated with masculinity or femininity. Examples include: "Chukwuma" - "God knows best" (often used for boys), "Chinwe" - "God owns" (often used for girls), "Obi" - "Heart" (used for both boys and girls), "Chukwudubem" - "God leads me" (often used for boys) and "Chidinma" - "God is beautiful" (often used for girls).

**History and Circumstances:** In some cases, Igbo names may be chosen to commemorate historical events or personal circumstances. These names carry a unique and significant meaning for the individual. Examples are: "Chukwuebuka" - "God is great" (often given after a near-death experience), and "Oluoma" - "The precious one/the good work".

In some cases, Igbo names are used to express the parents' emotions at the time of the child's birth. These names carry a unique and personal significance. Some examples are presented below: "Nwakaego" - "Child is greater than wealth" (given when a child is born after a long period of childlessness), "Nwabuikem" - "The child is my strength?" (expressing the uncertainty and mystery of a child's future potential).

## English Names

**Biblical Origins:** English names often draw from the Bible, reflecting the strong influence of Christianity on naming traditions. Biblical names like 'Esther' 'Daniel' 'David,' "Sarah," "Michael," and "Rachel" are widely used in English-speaking societies. These names often have Hebrew roots and carry religious significance.

**Surnames as Given Names:** Some English names reflect the historical practice of using family names to honor ancestors. Some English names often honor family heritage or indicate social status. Examples include "Taylor," "Mason," "Parker," and "Harrison."

**Compound Names:** English names often combine two words or elements to create meaningful names, like "Lily-Rose," "John-Paul," or "Mary-Ann."

**Germanic Origins:** Many English names have Germanic roots, reflecting the early Germanic influence on the English language. These names often feature elements like "ald" (old), "helm" (helmet), "berht" (bright), and "wyn" (friend). Examples include "Harold" (army ruler), "Edmund" (prosperous protector), and "Winifred" (holy reconciliation).

**Nature-Inspired Names:** Many English names are inspired by nature and natural elements, evoking images of flora, fauna, and geographical features. Examples include "Rose," "Lily," "Hunter," "River," and "Skye."

**Occupational Names:** Some English names are derived from occupations or professions, reflecting historical naming practices. Names like "Baker," "Carter," "Miller," and "Smith" were originally occupational surnames.

### **Semantic Meanings of Igbo Names**

**Blessings and Good Wishes:** Many Igbo names express blessings, good wishes, and positive attributes. Names like "Ifunanya" (love), "Chizitere" (God has written), and "Kamsiyochukwu" (as I have asked God) convey positive sentiments.

**Attributes and Character Traits:** Some Igbo names are chosen to reflect desired attributes or character traits for the child. Names like "Obinna" (father's heart) and "Chinasa" (God answers) convey specific qualities.

### **Semantic Meanings of English Names**

**Virtues and Attributes:** English names may convey virtues or attributes, such as "Grace," "Hope," "Joy," faith and "Patience."

**Occupations and Descriptions:** Some English names have historical connections to occupations or descriptions, such as "Hunter," "Archer," or "Miller."

**Geographical Origins:** English names can sometimes indicate geographical origins or family origins, like "London," "York," or "Scott, Brooklyn," "London," "Chester," and "Montgomery."

**Historical and Cultural Significance:** Some English names carry historical or cultural significance, reflecting commemorations of famous individuals or events. Examples include "Victoria" (after Queen Victoria) and "Lincoln" (after President Abraham Lincoln).

**Family and Ancestral Connections:** English names may be chosen to honor family members or ancestral heritage, emphasizing the importance of family lineage. Examples include "Jackson" (son of Jack) and "McKenzie" (son of Kenneth).

**Religious Connotations:** Many English names have religious connotations, reflecting the Christian faith and beliefs. Names like "Christian," "Gabriel," "Elijah," and "Michael" have biblical origins.

The linguistic patterns and semantic meanings of English names are deeply intertwined with historical, cultural, and religious factors. Such patterns are phonetic, morphological, and semantic patterns. English-speaking societies have a wide array of naming traditions, making each name unique and carrying a distinct significance to its bearers. The linguistic patterns of Igbo and English personal names demonstrate the significance of names in Igbo culture. Each name carries a special meaning, and the process of choosing a name involves thoughtful consideration and cultural significance. Igbo names are a reflection of the language's unique features and the deep-rooted traditions and values of the Igbo-speaking communities. The study highlights the significance of names as linguistic artifacts that carry personal and cultural meanings.

## **2. What are the cultural and social factors that shape naming practices in Igbo and English cultures?**

Naming practices in both Igbo and English cultures are influenced by a variety of cultural and social factors. These factors reflect the values, beliefs, historical context, and social dynamics of each community.

### **Sociological Influences**

Naming practices are influenced by *cultural norms, religious beliefs, and family traditions* in both linguistic communities. Some Igbo names are reflections of ancestral worship and family ties. In Igbo culture, ancestors are highly revered, and names may be chosen to honor family lineage and connections. These influences are explicated below. The name "Nwanneka" means "my siblings are supreme," emphasizing the importance of family ties. Again, religion plays a significant role in Igbo naming practices. As mentioned above, many Igbo names have theophoric elements, incorporating references to deities or spiritual beings. The name 'Chukwuma' means "God knows best," signifying a belief in divine knowledge. Igbo names often carry specific meanings and symbolism. The name "Obinna" means "my father's heart," conveying the love and connection with one's father. Naming ceremonies in Igbo culture are elaborate and hold deep cultural significance. During such ceremonies, names are formally given, and specific rituals and celebrations are observed. It must be stressed that the colonial era has had a profound impact on naming practices in both cultures. English names were often imposed on indigenous populations during colonial rule, leading to the adoption of English names among some Igbo communities.

The spread of Christianity introduced biblical names into both Igbo and English cultures. In Igbo culture, names like "Ndubuisi" (life is first) and "Chinedu" (God leads) have Christian connotations. In English-speaking cultures, names may be chosen to reflect social status, aspirations, or trends. For example, names like "Victor" and "Grace" emphasize attributes associated with success and virtue. English names often include family or surnames, reflecting the importance of family lineage. For instance, "Jackson" signifies "son of Jack," connecting the individual to their paternal lineage. Naming trends evolve over time, with certain names becoming popular in specific eras. For example, names like "Emily" and "William" have been popular in English-speaking societies for centuries. Furthermore, in modern times, globalization and multiculturalism have led to greater exposure to diverse naming practices. English names may be chosen by parents in Igbo-speaking communities due to cultural exchange and personal preferences. The name 'Chinweike' combines elements from both Igbo and English languages. "Chinwe" means "God owns," reflecting the Igbo theophoric element, while "Ike" is of English origin, meaning "strength" or "power." "Chizaram" is a unisex Igbo name meaning "God has answered me." The name incorporates the theophoric element "Chiza," combined with the

English word "ram," indicating that God has answered the individual's prayers. 'Chikaodinaka' means 'Everything is in God's hands'. The name 'Chinweike' combines elements from both Igbo and English languages. "Chinwe" means "God owns," reflecting the Igbo theophoric element, while "Ike" is of English origin, meaning "strength" or "power." Chizaram: "Chizaram" is a unisex Igbo name meaning "God has answered me." The name incorporates the theophoric element "Chiza," combined with the English word "ram," indicating that God has answered the individual's prayers.

Names often carry deep cultural meanings and provide a window into the rich tapestry of human societies. For instance, "Jackson" signifies "son of Jack," connecting the individual to their paternal lineage. The name 'Ngozi' (Blessing) reflects the cultural value of blessings and good fortune in Igbo society. Chukwuemeka: "God has done something great." It highlights the significance of divine actions in Igbo naming practices. Obiageli: "She came from a wealthy home." The name emphasizes the importance of social status and family background. Onyinyechukwu: "God's gift." It signifies the belief that children are gifts from God. Ezinne: 'Good mother' celebrates the role of mothers in Igbo families. The English name 'Johnson' (Son of John) indicates a paternal lineage, connecting the individual to the name John. The name 'William' (Resolute protector) suggests strength and protection. Grace (Divine favor) conveys a sense of divine blessings and grace. The name 'Victoria' (Victorious) reflects the notion of triumph and success. Faith meaning 'Trust in God' symbolizes religious faith and trust in a higher power. The name 'Amara' derived from the Igbo language, "Amara" means "grace". 'Ebere' means "mercy." This name showcases the multicultural influence of Igbo culture on English-speaking societies. 'Eliana' is a name with Hebrew origins, meaning "my God has answered." Its presence in English-speaking cultures illustrates the multicultural diversity in naming practices.

Some English names carry historical or cultural significance, reflecting commemorations of famous individuals or events. Examples include "Victoria" (after Queen Victoria) and "Lincoln" (after President Abraham Lincoln). Certain English names indicate geographical origins or places of significance. Examples include "Brooklyn," "London," "Chester," and "Montgomery."

Many English names have religious connotations, reflecting the Christian faith and beliefs. Names like "Christian," "Gabriel," "Elijah," and "Michael" have biblical origins.

The study showcased how names in both cultures often carry specific meanings or reflect familial and social connections. In Igbo culture, names often highlight spiritual beliefs, family ties, and societal values. In English culture, names may signify attributes, blessings, or connections to familial heritage. Naming practices in both cultures demonstrate the importance of language and naming traditions in expressing cultural identity and beliefs. These examples demonstrate how multiculturalism and diversity influence naming practices in both Igbo and English cultures. The incorporation of names from different languages and cultural backgrounds reflects the interconnectedness of societies and the richness of human naming traditions. Igbo names therefore, hold immense cultural significance and are deeply cherished within the community. The naming process involves thoughtful consideration of the name's meaning and its potential impact on the child's life.

### **Findings**

The findings revealed intriguing insights into the unique characteristics and cultural significance of naming traditions in these two linguistic systems. Through the analysis of phonetic structure, morphological components, and semantic implications of names, as well as interviews with some persons, several key findings emerged:

The study identified distinct linguistic patterns in Igbo and English personal names. Igbo names exhibited a rich phonetic diversity with a prevalence of tonal variations, reflecting the tonal nature of the Igbo language. On the other hand, English names displayed a more varied phonetic range influenced by the vast number of languages contributing to English anthroponymy. Semantic meanings embedded within names were found to be deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and historical contexts. Igbo names often reflected the attributes of deities, natural elements, or circumstances surrounding a child's birth. In contrast, English names frequently drew inspiration from biblical figures, historical personalities, or symbolic attributes.

Again, the research shed light on the cultural and social factors influencing the choice of personal names in both linguistic systems. For Igbo names, naming practices were observed to be

deeply connected to family lineage and ancestry. Names were used as a means of passing down cultural heritage and preserving familial identities. In English naming practices, historical events, royal lineages, and religious beliefs played pivotal roles in the selection of names. Religious ceremonies such as baptisms and christenings were found to hold significant influence in shaping English names, particularly in Western cultural contexts.

In addition, the study highlighted the evolving nature of personal names in both Igbo and English cultures. Contemporary naming trends in Igbo communities showcased a blend of traditional names with modern elements, reflecting a dynamic adaptation to changing times. Similarly, English names exhibited trends of adopting names from diverse cultural backgrounds, showcasing the global influence of the English language and its capacity to embrace names from various origins.

In terms of word formation, Igbo names are often formed by combining meaningful elements of the language, such as nouns, adjectives, verbs, and other linguistic components. For example, the name "Chukwuemeka" is formed from "Chukwu" (meaning God) and "emeka" (meaning one who does great deeds), creating the name (Chukwuemeka) "God has done great deeds." Prefixes and suffixes play a significant role in Igbo names. For instance, the prefix "Chi-" often refers to God or the spiritual realm. "Nwa-" is a common prefix indicating "child of," used to identify the child's lineage. For example, "Nwakaego" means "child is greater than wealth." Igbo names frequently draw inspiration from elements in nature, such as "Chioma" (meaning "good God") or "Chidike" (meaning "God is strong"). It must be stressed that some Igbo names commemorate historical events or personal circumstances, like "Chinua" (meaning "God will fight") or "Chidimma" (meaning "God is good"). On the other hand, some English names often involve the combination of elements to create compound names. These elements can be words with specific meanings, such as "rose" in names like Rosemary and Rosalie, or they can be syllables with no specific meaning but are combined to form pleasing and unique names, like "Lyn" in names such as Evelyn and Carolyn.

Furthermore, the research revealed that Igbo speakers expressed a deep sense of pride in their names, considering them as markers of cultural identity and a connection to their heritage. There

are family traditions associated with the English names, and these emphasize the role of names in forming familial bonds and shared values.

Summarily, we must buttress that names are seen to be more than mere labels; they represented a tapestry of linguistic heritage and cultural narratives, carrying the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of individuals and communities. The relevance of this study extends beyond the realms of linguistics and anthropology, serving as a testament to the richness and diversity of human naming practices. The research therefore, fosters cross-cultural appreciation and respect for the unique ways in which language and culture shape human identities across the globe.

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