

A MORPHOSEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF PLACE NAMES IN ASABA QUARTERS

Ngoka Regina Uchechi

Department of English

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Anambra State

uchegina64@gmail.com

07062257662

Abstract

This journal focuses on the names of the Asaba quarters. It examines the names of the five quarters that make up Asaba and provides a brief history of the town, including its landmass, population, and the predominant occupations of its ancestors. Despite the numerous studies carried out on Asaba, this area of morphosemantic investigation has received little or no attention, particularly with respect to the names of its quarters. A notable linguistic feature among three of the five quarters is the presence of the morpheme *Umu*, which means “children” in the Igbo language. Data for the study were obtained through interviews and archival sources (books). The theoretical frameworks adopted for this research are the Conceptual Theory of Meaning as propounded by John Locke (1960) and the Referential Theory of Meaning as propounded by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923). Findings reveal that two of the five quarters’ names express particular ideas in the minds of Asaba natives, while the remaining three refer to the children of their ancestors. The study shows that the original name of Asaba is *Aniahaba* (present-day Cable Point in Asaba), which translates roughly to “I have arrived.” The five quarters that make up Asaba are said to be the five sons of *Ka anyi nye be isi nwa* (Nnebisi), and their names are Ezenei, Ugbomanta, Umuagu, Umuaji, and Umuonaje. It is therefore concluded that the names of the Asaba quarters reflect the lineage and descendants of their originator.

Keywords: Asaba, Morphosemantic analysis, Place names, Semantics

Introduction

Language is a distinctively human system of communication, based on oral and written symbols. Ofoegbu (2021) posits that the human language is very unique because it has its own structure and its own system of organizing its component units into meaningful patterns. This simply means that there are rules governing the organization of sentences in a language. Ofoegbu (2012), building on his earlier works, defines language as “the human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate.” He further emphasizes that “language is man and man is language. Ofoegbu and Usar (2018) repeat and expand this definition, stressing that language is not only a system of communication but also a fundamental tool for expressing human experiences. The emphasis here remains on the exclusivity of language to humans and its indispensability in social life.

According to Ofoegbu (2024) “language is man and man is language”. Life has no meaning without language. Language is a means of interaction among people of the same community. Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) reaffirm earlier views, calling language “the human system of communication ... man and man is language ... man uses language for his everyday interaction.”

Asaba is the present state capital of Delta State in Nigeria, it is located in Oshimili South Local Government Area. It became the state capital in the year 1991, August 27th. Its land mass is about 268 km² (Wikipedia). The population of Asaba as at the last national census in 2006 was 149,603, Wikipedia gives 2011 estimation of 176,060 for the city proper from the 2025 estimate for Oshimili South Local Government Area the present population of Asaba is over 500,000 today. Asaba is also the Local Government Area headquarters, Asaba comprises of about 25 villages belonging to five quarters.

Asaba indigenes are known for farming (Ndudi 2006), this can be seen in the year 1875, Asaba could boast of wealthy, big time farmers who among other crops produced yams of various species, corn, cassava, pepper, pumpkin and melon. Asaba has many festivals of which the biggest is called 'Ezeugbo' it is usually celebrated in the month of September, the king of Asaba goes by the title - 'Asagba' and he is hailed 'Nna agu'. He governs with the Asagba in council, who also fine-tunes the decisions of the Otuaza. Some chieftaincy positions in Asaba are Asagba in council, Otuaza, Obia (Red cap Chiefs), Olinzele (Ogbueshi na bo). Their system of King ship is rotational; it does not remain in a particular quarter rather it goes round the entire quarters.

Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of writing this journal is to:

A. To study the way each name is formed (prefixes, suffixes, root word and compound word)

B. To identify what each name signifies or symbolizes, it kind of reveals something about either the culture or the ancestry or ancestors of that quarter.

- C. It shows the origin of the name bearers that is if they have always been from that place (indigene) or they are settlers.
- D. It depicts the people's beliefs, religion, traditions, etc.
- E. It also reveals the quarter's cultural heritage and history.

Literature Review

Ofoegbu (2022) defines Semantics as the study and analysis of meaning and the meaning of a word is the idea the word conveys in the heart or mind of the speaker or hearer. Having gone through 'A Morphological Analysis of Awka personal names by Udoe and Ofoegbu (2011) believe that more works that presents the systematic structure of names whether for places or people will soon become an area for academic research.

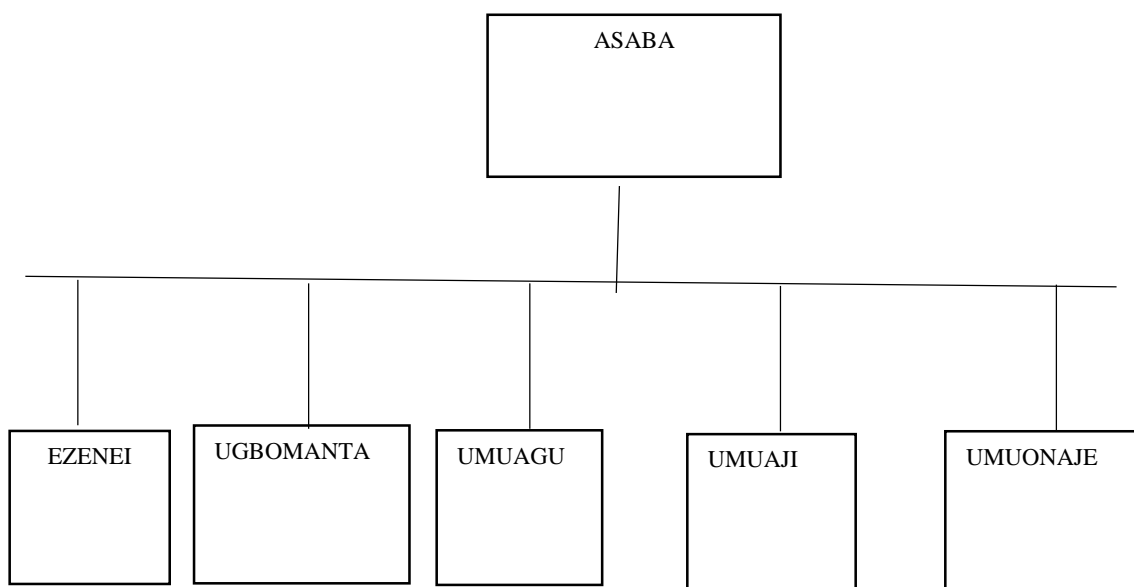
Kostanski (2009) defines toponyms (place names) as names to denote or identify human habitation (cities, towns, villages etc.) and political boundaries (states, municipalities etc.). They identify and respect culture, heritage and landscapes, and therefore offer much to cartographers, historians, genealogists, linguists, language planners and tourists. Weiner (1991) emphasizes that place names act "as mnemonics for the historical actions of humans that make places singular and significant". Basso (1990) explains that because of the inseparable connection of toponyms to specific localities, toponyms may be used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations – associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life.

A place is known to the outside world through its identity. The travellers visit places by their names in the course of their journey. Place names of a region speak about the geographical and historical peculiarities revealing cultural identities of the people. Place names do speak when there is no history. Place names narrate their interesting characteristics. Hence a place name is an expression of the name giver's thought process. (Padhi & Jena 2015).

Ebeogu (1993) in his study, 'Onomastics and Igbo Tradition of Politics' explains the traditional naming in Igbo as it relates to place names. He this using the morphological process of prefixation to show the common ancestry of Igbo toponyms. In his words, he posits that:

Although, nothing has been written about the morphosemantic analysis of the names of Asaba quarters; this paper will serve as a pointer and it would spur academia to explore further research in this direction. This will in turn bring to light areas that my research might not have covered.

Ofoegbu and Usar (2017), in their Stylistic Analysis of the Language of Politics of General Muhammadu Buhari's Campaign Speech of 2011, demonstrate how naming is structured around lexical, semantic, and graphological choices that are carefully selected to achieve rhetorical ends.



Brief History of Asaba

According to one version of oral history, it happened that within Ezeanyanwu's household was a pretty young lady called Diaba of the royal blood of Nteje in present day Anambra. Her parents sent her to be groomed by Ezeanyanwu, Ikenga seduced her and put her in the family way; when he had not formally married her. This incident brought a division between Ezeanyanwu and Ikenga; in the end Diaba was sent back to her parents at Nteje to have her baby. When the time came, Diaba had a baby boy; he was named 'Ka anebe is nwa nkea' shortened to Nnebisi. Translated, it means 'let us watch to see what this child will be.'

When he left his mother's place due to the ill treatment that was meted out on him; he went out in search of his father, he arrived at a place called 'Ani Ahaba' in today's Cable Point, Asaba. He took two wives, in all, they had five sons and a daughter for him. These sons are Ezenei, Ugbomanta, Umuagu, Umuaji, Umuonaje. Umu: This is a central Igbo name for children and three out of five quarters that makes up Asaba have "Umu" as its prefix -this places "Umu" at the initial position.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the conceptual theories of meaning were employed in the morphological analysis of the names of the quarters that makes up Asaba. This means that the names are a result of the concept or mental representations they trigger in the minds of language users especially the native speakers. Referential theory of meaning refers the relationship between words and the things they stand for in the real world. Below are the details on the names of the quarters:

The Five Quarters of Asaba

1. Ezenei: is the first of all five sons of Nnebisi. 'Eze' is popularly translated to mean King.
2. Ugbomanta: is the second son of Nnebisi. 'Nta' here means younger.
3. Umuagu: is the third son of Nnebisi. 'Umu' means children and 'agu' means lion.
4. Umuaji: is the fourth son of Nnebisi. 'Umuaji' means the children of Ajaji.
5. Umuonaje: is the fifth son of Nnebisi. 'Umuonaje' means children of Onaje.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design employed in this research is interview and archival research or documents, (books), Internet, journals.

Data Sources

Data for this study were gotten from the following sources:

- A. Interview.
- B. Books.
- C. Internet.
- D. Journals.

Data Analysis

The analysis took a four-stage process.

- A. Identification: The names of the quarters were explicitly mentioned.
- B. Categorization: The names of the quarters were arranged according to their birth position.
- C. Semantic Meaning: The meaning of each name was elucidated.
- D. Interpretation: The significance of each meaning was discussed or explicated in this paper.

Morphosemantic Analysis of Asaba Quarters

This paper inspects carefully the morphological and Semantic combination of the names of quarters that make up Asaba, the State Capital of Delta State, Nigeria. The reason is to uncover the meanings and linguistic structures contained in these names, as well as the cultural and historical values they convey.

Asaba comprises of several traditional quarters: Ezenei, Ugbomanta, Umuagu, Umuaji, Umuonaje. Each of these names originates from deep ancestral, cultural and genealogical significance. Understanding their morphological traits helps to interpret their meanings and how they reflect the people's history.

Below is the analysis, it involves breaking down each quarter's name into morphemes and interpreting their Semantic components.

| S/N | Quarter Name. | Morphological Breakdown. | Semantic Interpretation |
|-----|---------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1. | Ezenei. | Eze + nei. | The children of the first son of Kai ne be isi nwa. (Nnebisi) |
| 2. | Ugbomanta. | Ugboma + nta | The children of the young son of Kai ne be isi nwa (Nnebisi) |
| 3 | Umuagu. | Umu + agu. | The children of a lion. (Boldness/bravery) |
| 4. | Umuaji. | Umu + aji. | The children of Ajaji. |
| 5. | Umuonaje. | Umu + Onaje. | The children of Onaje. |

Discussion on Findings

This paper analysis reveals that the morphological structure of the names of quarters in Asaba follow a compound word pattern. From a Semantic perspective, the names exude genealogical, ancestral, cultural and historical meanings.

It also reveals the deep connection between the natives and their names, it serves as a means of identification, it subtly explains some traits that they possess and also helps people to know what to expect from them. Their systems of belief and certain practices stem from the relationship existing in their name and their roots. It also reveals significant linguistic, cultural and historical dimensions embedded in the naming system of the community. The analysis shows that quarters' names are not arbitrary; rather they possess deep meanings that reflect the people's worldview, migration history, social structure and traditional belief system.

1. Morphological Structure of the Names

From the data gathered, it was observed that most of the quarter names in Asaba are morphologically complex, mostly formed through compounding and derivation. Examples include Umuagu (children of Agu), Umuaji (children of Ajaji) and Umuonaje (children of Onaje). the prefix "Umu", which recurs across many names, functions as a morphological marker denoting decent or lineage. It literally means "children of" or "descendants of". This morphological pattern demonstrates how linguistic forms are used to encode kinship relations and group identity within Asaba society.

2. Semantic Significance

Semantically, the names of the quarters carry meanings that point to origin, ancestry, geography and sometimes socio-political roles. For example:

- Umuagu denotes the descendants of Agu, believed to be one of the founding ancestors of Asaba.
- Umuaji signifies the descendants of Ajaji, another ancestral figure.
- Umuonaje follow the same semantic pattern, signifying lineage groups that trace their roots to distinct progenitors.

This semantic pattern shows that the naming of quarters serves as both a historical record and a social identifier, preserving the genealogical and territorial heritage of Asaba people.

3. Cultural and Historical Reflections

The findings also unveil that the names of the quarters are linguistic reflections of Asaba's historical evolution. Each name is tied to inter-clan relations or significant events or even migration narratives. The recurrence of ancestral references in the names demonstrates the importance of ancestry and kinship in cultural consciousness of the people.

4. Linguistic Patterns and Identity

The linguistic patterning in the naming system of Asaba demonstrates how morphology and semantics combine to mark group identity. The consistent use of prefix such as Umu- distinguishes between kinship-based and territory-based identities, Umu- names emphasize genealogy. This distinction highlights how language encodes social belonging: to be part of Umuagu implies belonging by birth.

5. Socio-Linguistic Implications

The findings also show that the names function as socio-linguistic markers that reinforce unity and differentiation within the larger Asaba community. Natives identify themselves through their quarter names, which serve as linguistic symbols of solidarity and pride. The quarter names also play a role in traditional governance and social organization, as lineage and territorial divisions determine participation in communal festivals, inheritance patterns and leadership selection.

6. Summary of Findings

In summary, the study finds that:

- The names of Asaba quarters are largely morphologically motivated, showing productive use of prefix such as Umu-.
- Semantically, they encode genealogical, historical and territorial meanings.
- The names are cultural signifiers, reflecting the social values and historical consciousnesses of the people.
- The naming pattern sustains social cohesion and identity within the community.
- The morphosemantic features of these names show how language, culture, genealogy, belief and history interrelate in African naming systems.

Conclusion

This study on the morphosemantic analysis of the names of quarters in Asaba has shown that place names in the town are not arbitrary linguistic formations but are deeply rooted in the people's history, culture, beliefs, and social experiences. The analysis reveals that most of the names are derived from meaningful morphemes in the Igbo language—particularly the Asaba dialect—and that these morphemes carry considerable semantic and cultural weight.

Each quarter's name reflects aspects of Asaba's historical and cultural development, including migration patterns, kinship structures, and communal values. Some names commemorate ancestral founders, while others signify physical landmarks, occupational practices, bravery, birth position, or spiritual associations. This indicates that the naming system functions as both a linguistic and cultural archive, preserving the collective memory and identity of the Asaba people.

From a morphological standpoint, the names are mainly compounds and derivations, often formed by combining free and bound morphemes that denote people, places, or attributes. Semantically, their meanings extend beyond literal translations to convey deeper sociocultural and symbolic interpretations. Thus, the morphosemantic structure of these names demonstrates the dynamic relationship between language and culture.

In conclusion, the morphosemantic analysis underscores that the place names of the Asaba quarters are important linguistic artefacts that archive the community's worldview. Understanding their morphological composition and semantic implications not only enriches linguistic scholarship but also contributes to cultural preservation and the reinforcement of communal identity.

References

- Basso, K.H. 1990. *Western Apache Language and Culture. Essays in Linguistic Anthropology*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.
- City population.de-Oshimili South LGA population projections (2022 projection and growth data)
- Ebeogu, A. (1993) *Onomastics and Igbo tradition of Politics in Anyanwu, U.D and Aguwa*,
- Kostanski, L. (2009). "What's in a Name? Place and Toponymic Attachment, Identity and Dependence. A Case Study of the Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park Name Restoration Process". PhD thesis, University of Ballarat. Available online. Accessed 1stSeptember, 2011.
- Ndili, A. N. (2006) *Asaba 1875-2006 Reflections of her Growth and Development*. His Bride Ventures, Asaba.
- Ofoegbu, C.O (2012). *Language and Democracy. The Nigerian experience*. Journal of social science and public policy Minna;Niger Vol 4 .
- Ofoegbu, C.O, & Usar, I. I. (2017). Stylistic analysis of the language of politics of General Muhammadu Buhari's campaign speech of 2011. *Ansu Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 1(1), 1–20.
<https://journals.ezenwaohaetorc.org/index.php/AJLLS/article/view/224>
- Ofoegbu, C. O., & Usar, I. I. (2018). *A Morpho-Semantic Analysis of Lexical Creativity of Political Speech of Nigeria's Independence Anniversary 2015*. *Journal of Linguistics, Language and Igbo Studies (JoLLIS)*, 2(1), 112-131.
- Ofoegbu C.O. (2021). *Issues in Language and National Development in Nigeria: Onitsha*; Ralph Mustard Limited.(Revised edition)
- Ofoegbu C.O. 2022. *Syntax: An Introductory Text*. Onitsha; Ralph Mustard Limited. (Revised edition)
- Ofoegbu C.O 2024: "Discourse Analysis of Muhammadu Buhari's Democracy Day Speech, 2019" *ESTAGA: Journal of English Language and Literary Studies*. Awka: Anambra State. Vol 1 No 2. (Online)
- Ofoegbu, C.O, & Ishima,J.L J (2024):*Negation and Marking strategies in the ozubulu dialect of Igbo*. **USEM** Journal of languages, linguistics & Literature Vol 12.
- Oshimili South/Delta State pages and Nigeria Statistics portals referenced for official 2006 counts and protection methodology.
- Wikipedia -Asaba (area 2006 census, 2011 eat, metro notes)