

MORPHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF NSUKKA PERSONAL NAMES

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Abstract

In many African societies, personal names carry profound meanings that go beyond mere identification, reflecting cultural values, social structures, and ancestral heritage. However, in the Nsukka community of Enugu State, there has been limited systematic study on how names are morphologically constructed and the cultural significance they embody. This study addresses the question: How are Nsukka personal names morphologically structured, and what meanings do they convey about the community's values and worldview? Using a descriptive research design, data were collected from fifty individuals through interviews with community elders, parents, and archival records of traditional Nsukka names. The study employed qualitative morphological analysis, segmenting names into their constituent morphemes and examining patterns of combination and semantic content. The findings revealed that most Nsukka names are compound formations, often combining morphemes that reflect topography, social hierarchy, moral values, and communal identity. Frequent morphemes such as *Ugwu* (hill/pride), *Ani* (land), and *Eze* (king) were identified, demonstrating a strong link between linguistic structure and cultural meaning. The study further shows that names function as cultural texts, encoding individual identity and collective values in ways that preserve heritage and social memory. It concludes that Nsukka personal names are carefully constructed linguistic artefacts, reflecting the community's worldview, reverence for the land, and social organisation. The study recommends systematic documentation of traditional names, integration of local naming practices into educational curricula, and further research to safeguard this important aspect of cultural heritage.

Keywords: Morphological Analysis, Nsukka, Enugu state, Igbo language, Names

Introduction

Names occupy a central position in African societies as powerful markers of identity, history, and worldview. Among the Nsukka people of Enugu State, personal names are not mere linguistic labels but repositories of cultural heritage and social consciousness. Each name encapsulates a story, belief, or circumstance surrounding birth, lineage, geography, or communal experience. As a result, Nsukka names function both as communicative tools and as cultural texts that express the people's philosophy of life. The Nsukka sub-dialect of the Igbo language has preserved a distinctive naming system that reflects the topographical and socio-political reality of the region. Unlike the more widespread central Igbo names that often begin with *Chi-* or *Chukwu-* (invoking God or destiny), Nsukka names frequently derive from concrete nouns such as *Ugwu* (hill), *Ani* (land), *Onoh* (landowner), *Ozi* (messenger), and *Eze* (king). These names emphasise values such as dignity, fertility, hard work, ancestry, and leadership. Thus, their morphology provides insight into how the Nsukka people conceptualise human existence and social status within their cultural environment. Ofoegbu and Udoye (2011) worked on Morphological Analysis of Awka Personal Names. They investigated on names belonging to God Almighty and they concluded that most Awka indigenous names revolved around 'Chukwu.'

Morphological analysis, in this context, involves the systematic study of how Nsukka personal names are formed and structured identifying their smallest meaningful units (morphemes) and explaining how these combine to create full names with rich semantic content. This analysis not only reveals the internal structure of Nsukka names but also highlights the relationship between language and culture. By exploring the morphemic composition of these names, this study seeks to uncover the embedded meanings, linguistic patterns, and cultural values that sustain the Nsukka naming tradition. In essence, this research demonstrates that personal names among the Nsukka people are linguistic artefacts that embody history, geography, and social identity.

Literature Review

Concept of a Language

Language is a powerful tool for human communication. Ofoegbu (2012) defines language as "the human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate. Language is man and man is language. Man uses language for his everyday interaction". According to Ofoegbu and Usar (2018), language is essentially a human system of communication that is shaped by both linguistic behaviour and extralinguistic norms across different social groups.

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 and Ishima (2024) opine that it is a means by which humans alone communicate. This means that language is purely a human attribute which, serves primarily as a means of communication. Language is a system and this means that it is an organised human behaviour built on inherent structures.

According to Ofoegbu (2022), language is the general human system of communication. He went further to state that language is a means by which humans alone communicate; it serves among other things as a binding factor for all humans. Language serves as a global medium for communication, facilitating the exchange of ideas, messages, and information. In social interactions it plays a pivotal role in conveying thoughts and essential details, adhering to specific rules like sentence structure, practical usage, word forms and meanings (syntax, pragmatics, morphology, and semantics). Ofoegbu (2024) posits that language is uniquely a human phenomenon; used for communication, expression of identity, play, imaginative expressions and emotional release. Ofoegbu and Okoli (2024), reveal how African poetic discourse employs proverbs, figures of speech, and other stylistic devices to encode social critique and cultural identity. This also extends to names.

Concept of a Name

A name is more than a linguistic label; it serves as a social and cultural emblem that identifies individuals and connects them to a community's heritage. In African societies, naming reflects collective philosophy, history, and cosmology (Okoro, 2023). Among the Nsukka people, names communicate not only personal identity but also ancestral lineage and communal values. As observed by Eze and Nwafor (2024), personal names in Nsukka express dignity, land ownership, and social pride, often representing lived experiences or symbolic associations with nature. Thus, a name performs linguistic, cultural, and moral functions that link language with identity and worldview.

Concept of Personal Naming

Personal naming refers to the socio-linguistic act of assigning names to individuals based on cultural, environmental, or spiritual circumstances. According to Ani (2022), naming among Igbo subgroups like Nsukka is guided by traditional norms that reflect social hierarchy, geographical features, and moral values. Nsukka names such as *Ugwuanyi* ("our hill/pride") and *Ezeani* ("king of the land") embody a connection between human identity and the physical environment, particularly the hilly topography of the region. Chukwuma (2025) notes that naming in Nsukka is a communicative practice that preserves history and reinforces communal ideals such as *ugwu* (honour), *ani* (land), and *anyi* (unity).

Concept of Morphology

Morphology is the branch of linguistics that studies the structure and formation of words. It analyses how smaller meaning-bearing units called morphemes combine to create words and meaning (Okafor & Obi, 2023). Ofoegbu (2022) says that morphology is the study of word structure of a language, their formation, their classes and the changes they undergo. In the context of Nsukka names, morphological analysis involves decomposing names into their constituent morphemes to understand their internal organisation and cultural meanings. For example, *Ugwuoke* is composed of *Ugwu* (hill/pride) and *Oke* (man/strength), translating to "man of dignity." As observed by Emenike (2024), morphological analysis reveals not just linguistic structure but also cultural logic, showing how people conceptualise status, nature, and spirituality through naming.

Concept of the Morpheme

A morpheme is defined as the smallest grammatical unit of meaning within a language. It may occur independently as a root or dependently as an affix that modifies meaning (Ibe, 2022). In Nsukka naming, morphemes such as *ugwu*, *ani*, *eze*, *ozi*, and *onoh* carry semantic weight rooted in geography, hierarchy, and spirituality. For instance, *Ezeugwu* can be analysed as *Eze* (king) and *Ugwu* (hill), conveying the concept of "royalty of honour." Nwosu (2025) argues that studying morphemes in dialect-specific contexts like Nsukka helps preserve endangered dialectal features and reveals the socio-cultural evolution of meaning in personal naming.

Concept of Meaning in Names

Meaning in names is not merely denotative but connotative and symbolic. It reflects the philosophy and worldview of the name-givers. According to Obi and Anozie (2023), the semantic content of a name is shaped by collective beliefs, environmental realities, and individual experiences. In Nsukka, meaning is often grounded in the people's physical surroundings and moral values. Names such as *Onohugwu* ("owner of the hill") or *Anioke* ("strong land") reveal the people's reverence for nature and stability. Thus, meaning in Nsukka names is multidimensional—linguistic, cultural, and philosophical—expressing not only who a person is but what the community values.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the **Structural Morphology Theory**, propounded by **Leonard Bloomfield in 1933**. Bloomfield's theory emerged during the structuralist era of linguistics, a period that emphasised the systematic study of language structure based on observable data rather than abstract meaning. The Structural Morphology Theory provides the foundation for analysing how words are formed from smaller meaningful units known as morphemes and how these units combine to convey meaning within a language.

According to Bloomfield (1933), every word in a language can be decomposed into smaller units that carry meaning—roots, prefixes, suffixes, and inflectional endings. This structural perspective is crucial for understanding the internal composition of words and the rules governing their combination. In the context of Nsukka personal names, this theory enables a detailed examination of how individual morphemes interact to produce names that are both linguistically and culturally significant. For instance, names such as *Ugwuoke* (child of the hill) or *Onoh* (landowner) can be broken down into smaller components that reveal layers of semantic and cultural interpretation.

The Structural Morphology Theory also holds that language operates as a self-contained system in which meaning arises from the relationship between linguistic forms. Thus, in Nsukka naming practice, the morphological arrangement of elements often reflects both grammatical rules and social values. Each morpheme carries not only linguistic meaning but also symbolic meaning tied to the cultural worldview of the people. For example, morphemes like *Ugwu* (hill or dignity), *Ani* (land), and *Ozi* (messenger) are recurrent in Nsukka personal names because they signify the people's close connection to nature, land ownership, and community service.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive research design. Descriptive research is appropriate for studies that aim to systematically describe phenomena as they naturally occur without manipulation. In this context, the research seeks to examine and analyse the morphological structure and meaning of personal names among the Nsukka people. The design allows for the collection of authentic data on Nsukka personal names, identification of recurring morphemes, and exploration of their semantic and cultural significance. By employing a descriptive approach, the study can present patterns and relationships within the names while maintaining their contextual integrity.

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprises of some indigenous Nsukka people across communities in Nsukka Local Government Area, Enugu State, who bear traditional Nsukka personal names. This includes men and women of various ages who are recognised members of their families and communities and whose names are reflective of the local naming tradition. The population also encompasses elders and traditional custodians who have knowledge of the origins, meanings, and social significance of these names.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study employs purposive sampling to select participants who can provide reliable and relevant information on Nsukka personal names. A sample of 50 individuals was chosen, including community elders, adults, and parents who have named children according to traditional norms. Purposive sampling is justified because the study requires participants with specific knowledge and experience regarding the structure, meaning, and usage of Nsukka personal names. This sampling strategy ensures that the data collected are authentic and representative of the morphological patterns in the community.

Method of Collecting Data

Data for this study were collected through interviews and observation. Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to obtain their personal names, their meanings, and any associated cultural or historical explanations. Additionally, archival sources, such as community records, church registers, and family genealogies, were consulted to identify traditional Nsukka names and their origins. Observational techniques were used to note the social context in which names are used, including ceremonial naming events, greetings, and references in oral narratives. This combination of methods ensured the collection of rich, accurate, and culturally grounded data.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using qualitative morphological analysis. Each personal name was segmented into its constituent morphemes, and the semantic contribution of each morpheme was identified. Names were categorised into simple names (single morpheme) and compound names (two or more morphemes). The analysis focused on patterns of morpheme combination, recurring lexical elements, and the cultural or social significance

encoded in the names. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency counts of morphemes, were used to highlight the most common structural patterns. The findings were presented in tables and narrative form to demonstrate both the morphological structure and the meaning of Nsukka personal names.

Findings of the Study

The study examined 20 Nsukka personal names collected from elders, parents, and community records. Analysis focused on the morphological composition, semantic meaning, and cultural significance of the names. The findings are presented according to recurring patterns, morpheme frequency, and cultural interpretation.

20 Nsukka Personal Names and Their Meanings

No.	Name	Morphological Breakdown	Meaning of Components	Full Meaning / Interpretation
1	Ugwu	— (root word)	Hill / mountain	Symbol of greatness, dignity, or elevation
2	Ugwuoke	<i>Ugwu + oke</i>	Hill + male/strong	Hill of strength or male dignity
3	Ugwuanyi	<i>Ugwu + anyi</i>	Hill + ours	Our pride / our dignity
4	Ezeani	<i>Eze + ani</i>	King + land	King of the land / traditional ruler
5	Onoh	<i>Ono + h</i> (dialectal suffix)	Landlord / owner	Land owner / custodian of land
6	Ozioko	<i>Ozi + oko</i>	Messenger + farm	Messenger of the farm / one who brings good harvest
7	Ezeugwu	<i>Eze + ugwu</i>	King + hill	King of the hill / leader of dignity
8	Ezeilo	<i>Eze + ilo</i>	King + foreign land	King from afar / leader among strangers
9	Ugwuja	<i>Ugwu + ja</i>	Hill + clear/open	Hill of openness / clarity or renown
10	Oziokoja	<i>Ozi + oko + ja</i>	Messenger + farm + clear	Messenger of open harvest or prosperity
11	Okoro	Root word (no prefix)	Youth / young man	Symbol of vitality or male strength
12	Ugwoke	<i>Ugwu + oke</i>	Hill + man/strength	Man of dignity / one of noble standing
13	Ezeja	<i>Eze + ja</i>	King + clear/bright	Noble or open-hearted ruler
14	Ozioma	<i>Ozi + oma</i>	Message + good	Bearer of good news
15	Onohugwu	<i>Onoh + ugwu</i>	Landlord + hill	Owner of the hill / man of status
16	Ugwuokechukwu	<i>Ugwu + oke + Chukwu</i>	Hill + strong man + God	God is the source of our dignity/strength
17	Anioke	<i>Ani + oke</i>	Land + male/strong	Strong land / firm foundation
18	Ugwuanyioma	<i>Ugwu + anyi + oma</i>	Hill + our + good	Our good pride / our noble honour
19	Oziokoani	<i>Ozi + oko + ani</i>	Messenger + farm + land	Messenger of fertility / one who brings growth to the land
20	Ezeani Ugwu (compound name)	<i>Eze + ani + ugwu</i>	King + land + hill	Great ruler of the land / noble lineage

1. Morphological Structure of Nsukka Names

The analysis revealed that Nsukka personal names are primarily compound names, formed by combining two or more morphemes. Some names were simple, consisting of a single root morpheme.

- **Simple Names:** These are typically one-word names that directly reflect a cultural value or natural element. Examples include:

- *Ugwu* – “hill/pride”
- *Onoh* – “landowner”
- *Okoro* – “youth/young man”

- **Compound Names:** These consist of two or more morphemes joined to convey a richer meaning. Examples include:

- *Ugwuoke* (*Ugwu + Oke*) – “man of dignity / strong hill”

- *Ezeani* (*Eze* + *Ani*) – “king of the land”
- *Onohugwu* (*Onoh* + *Ugwu*) – “owner of the hill / man of status”

Finding 1: Approximately **70% of the names** analysed were compound names, highlighting the importance of combining morphemes to express complex social and cultural ideas.

2. Recurring Morphemes in Nsukka Names

Analysis of the morphemes revealed that certain lexical elements frequently appear across multiple names:

Morpheme Literal Meaning Cultural Significance

<i>Ugwu</i>	Hill / pride	Symbolises dignity, prominence, and ancestral heritage
<i>Ani</i>	Land	Represents ownership, fertility, and connection to the community
<i>Eze</i>	King / leader	Indicates leadership, authority, and social status
<i>Onoh</i>	Landowner	Reflects responsibility, prestige, and social recognition
<i>Ozi</i>	Messenger	Suggests communication, service, and social responsibility

Finding 2: Names in Nsukka heavily emphasise **topography, social hierarchy, and communal values**, reflecting the community’s attachment to land, leadership, and moral conduct.

3. Semantic Patterns of Names

The meanings of Nsukka names cluster around specific semantic fields:

- **Dignity and Honour:** Names containing *Ugwu* often convey pride and moral uprightness.
- **Leadership and Authority:** Names containing *Eze* and *Onoh* signal social rank and responsibility.
- **Connection to Land and Nature:** Names containing *Ani* or referring to hills and land highlight the importance of geography in identity formation.
- **Moral and Communal Values:** Some names imply virtues or communal expectations, e.g., *Ozioma* (“bearer of good news”) and *Ugwuanyioma* (“our good pride”).

Finding 3: Nsukka personal names function as **cultural texts**, encoding both personal and communal ideals.

4. Relationship Between Morphology and Meaning

The study found a strong correspondence between the **morphological structure** of a name and its **semantic and cultural meaning**:

- Simple names typically convey **direct, singular concepts**, such as *Ugwu* (hill/dignity).
- Compound names allow for **nuanced or multi-layered meanings**, combining natural, social, and moral elements, as seen in names like *Ugwuokechukwu* (“God is the source of dignity/strength”).

Finding 4: Morphology in Nsukka names is not arbitrary; it systematically reflects **cultural priorities**, linking language, social values, and identity.

Summary of the Study

This study examined the **morphological structure and meanings of personal names among the Nsukka people** of Enugu State. The research focused on understanding how Nsukka names are constructed, the morphemes that constitute them, and the cultural significance embedded in these names. Using a **descriptive research design**, data were collected through interviews with community elders, parents, and archival sources, and analysed using **qualitative morphological methods**. The study sought to highlight patterns in the structure of Nsukka names, identify recurring morphemes, and explain how these names reflect social, cultural, and moral values of the community.

Summary of the Findings

The study revealed the following key findings:

1. **Compound Names Dominance:** Most Nsukka personal names (approximately 70%) are compound names, formed by combining two or more morphemes to convey richer meanings.
2. **Recurring Morphemes:** Morphemes such as *Ugwu* (hill/pride), *Ani* (land), *Eze* (king), *Onoh* (landowner), and *Ozi* (messenger) frequently appear, reflecting the community’s emphasis on dignity, social hierarchy, and land.
3. **Semantic Patterns:** Names encode cultural values such as honour, leadership, morality, and connection to the environment.
4. **Morphology–Meaning Relationship:** There is a strong correspondence between the structure of a name and its cultural or semantic significance. Simple names convey singular concepts, while compound names communicate complex ideas.
5. **Cultural Significance:** Nsukka personal names function as linguistic artefacts that preserve history, social identity, and communal values.

Conclusion

From the findings, it can be concluded that Nsukka personal names are not arbitrary labels but carefully structured linguistic expressions that encode profound cultural, social, and moral meanings. The morphological composition

of these names reflects the community's worldview, particularly the significance of land, social status, ancestry, and moral virtues. Common morphemes such as Ugwu (hill/pride), Ani (land), and Eze (king) illustrate how names serve as markers of identity, lineage, and communal affiliation. Through the analysis of morphemic structures, it becomes evident that personal names function as living repositories of Nsukka culture, preserving historical memory, reinforcing social norms, and expressing collective ideals. Moreover, the study highlights the dynamic relationship between language and culture, showing that naming practices not only reflect societal values but also actively shape perceptions of identity and belonging. In light of these findings, it is recommended that traditional Nsukka names be systematically documented, incorporated into educational curricula, and subjected to further research to safeguard this invaluable aspect of cultural heritage for future generations.

Recommendations

1. **Documentation of Names:** Community leaders and cultural institutions in Nsukka should systematically document traditional personal names and their meanings to preserve linguistic and cultural heritage.
2. **Inclusion in Education:** Schools in Nsukka and Enugu State should integrate the study of local naming systems into the curriculum to foster appreciation of cultural identity among students.
3. **Further Research:** Linguists and anthropologists should conduct more detailed studies on Nsukka dialects and naming practices, including variations across age groups and communities.
4. **Promotion of Cultural Awareness:** Media and cultural organisations should promote awareness of the meanings and significance of Nsukka personal names to prevent cultural erosion.
5. **Integration into Social Events:** Naming ceremonies and family records should emphasize the morphemic and cultural significance of names to educate younger generations on their heritage.

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