

Acculturation of English into Yoruba Personal Names: A Socio-Phonetic Analysis

Abstract

This paper examined the syllabification patterns of the acculturation of Yoruba personal into the English language and its implications for cultural identity. The major instruments employed for the study were two questionnaires; one was to elicit information on the subjects' attitudinal disposition to acculturative forms of Yoruba names and the other for verification task. There were in-depth interviews and observations of the target group. The data comprised purposively selected fifty University undergraduates in Southwestern Nigerian universities. The objectives of the study were to describe, phonologically, the acculturative forms of names and their influence on the cultural identity of the subjects. The findings revealed that there is already a cultural void emerging from the preference that Yoruba youths have for acculturative forms of Yoruba names.

Keywords: **Acculturation, syllabification, Yoruba, English, language.**

Introduction

The richness of Africa's oral tradition, culture and values are embedded in the names that African children traditionally bear. Such names often reflect the circumstances surrounding the birth of, as well as the parental desires, expectations and prayers for the children. However, acculturation of English into Yoruba names seems to have begun charting a course for the African languages, which would ultimately impact the entire African cultural identity, since language 'plays a large and significant role in culture' (Soneye, 2003:1). This paper therefore sets out to assess, descriptively, the phonological patterns of twenty purposively selected Yoruba names in both their original and acculturative forms, as well as the socio-cultural implications of this acculturation on the identity and attitudinal dispositions of the bearers of the names.

Acculturation happens when there is an exchange of cultural features due to constant interactions of persons or groups having different cultures, in which case, the original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered, while the groups remain distinct. English-oriented acculturation, or 'Anglicization,' is inevitable and considered advantageous in the study of contact linguistics (Kachru, 1989). However, a cross section of the Nigerian population feels that the English language in the 'hands' of the

Nigerian youth is more of a 'minus' to the African culture than a 'plus'. As Gut (2007:53) says, "poor pronunciation can make a foreign language learner very difficult to understand;" similarly, abbreviations of African names or a total overhauling of their semantic and lexical forms can be distort their cultural import.

According to Gikandi (1999:162), "The multiplicity of meanings usually attached to specific words in African languages-underlying socio-cultural factors in works and speeches by Africans cannot be translated." If translation of African culture and values 'cannot' be subjected to adequate translation, then African names cannot also assume their rightful texture when anglicized. 'Anglicization' is itself a form of acculturation (and is used interchangeably with Anglicization and Englishization in this study). It is a term used in referring to the linguistic influence of English on another language. It has become a valuable tool of modernizing a language. Moreover, there exists a popular opinion on the indispensability of English in Nigeria in view of the country's multi- ethnic and multi-linguistic nature. However, whether or not personal names in Africa, as exemplified in Nigeria, should be anglicized has remained controversial.

The role of English as a language of specialization, as well as its usefulness as a source of vocabulary and a vehicle for expressing new ideas (especially modern technological terms) more precisely cannot be over-emphasized. In view of this fact, the acculturation of English into Yoruba is a natural development, given the historical contact between the two languages. Indeed, there is hardly any language community whose customs have developed uninfluenced by foreign culture, or that has not borrowed and reinvented foreign ideas. Therefore, this paper does not intend to question the contact between these languages but rather to examine the syllabification patterns of the anglicized names, the reasons for the anglicisation of such personal names among Nigerian University students, their attitudinal dispositions of the subjects to the phenomenon, and the implications of these for linguistic/cultural identity.

Methodology

Twenty names, seventeen of which are purely Yoruba and three of Arabic roots, were employed as the primary data for this analysis. The researcher's prior knowledge as a University lecturer for more than a decade in Nigeria and interactions with several undergraduates in Southwestern Nigeria helped in the selection of data on personal names which are observed as common but not any longer 'original'. A purposive sampling of students that actually bore some of those names and were of Yoruba ethnic origin was done and a questionnaire administered to them. They were required to answer questions such as what their original or full names were, what they were often called by their colleagues, whether or not they liked being addressed by their original names or the acculturative forms, and in what contexts they would prefer either the original or the anglicized forms. (See Appendix B on the end page). The data were collected using the verification task and the 4-Likert questionnaire methods.

A comparative analysis of the syllable structures of the original Yoruba and very few Arabic (three in all) and acculturative forms was undertaken to ascertain if the anglicized or acculturative forms actually bore the forms of English syllables.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Table 1: List of original and acculturative equivalents of selected names and their meanings or translations

S/N	Shortened Yoruba names	Basic Forms	Acculturative form	➤ Additional comments and translations
A	Abiodun	Abodunrin,	Abbey	Abodunrin, is usually given to children born during a festival celebration
	Ajiboyé	Ajiboyé	Ajiboy	Children born into royal families are named <i>Ajiboyé</i>
B	Babalola	Babalola	Babs	
	Bukola	Oluwabukola, Oyabukola etc	Bukky	<i>Oluwabukola</i> is abbreviated to <i>Bukola</i>
	Bilikisu	Bilikisu	Billy	<i>Bilikisu</i> is originally Arabic name
D	Damilola	Oluwadamilola, Osundamilola etc	Dammy	Sometimes <i>Damilola</i> may be affixed to the name of a deity such as Osun or Oya to read <i>Oyadamilola etc.</i>
F	Fakeyẹ	Ifakeyẹ	Faks	<i>Fakeye</i> is named after Ifa, a deity or mode of worship in African Traditional religion
	Fẹmi	Oluwafẹmi	Femsy	<i>Oluwafẹmi</i> is abbreviated to <i>Femi</i>
I	Ibukun	Ibukunoluwa	I.B	<i>Ibukunoluwa</i> means “God’s blessings”
J	Jumokẹ	Ajumokẹ	Jummy	<i>Ajumokẹ</i> , is given to children who already have siblings etc that will unite to care for them
K	Kẹhinde	Omokẹhinde	Kenny	<i>Omokẹhinde</i> is the name for the last in a set of twin. <i>Kẹhinde</i> is believed to be the older of the two.
	Kayode	Oluwakayode	Kayus	<i>Oluwakayode</i> means “God has brought much joy”.
	Kafayat	Kifayatulai	Kaffy	<i>Kifayatulai</i> is an Arabic name which means “sufficiency”, but often called <i>Kafayat</i> by the Yoruba
M	Morufu	Morufu	Murphy	<i>Morufu</i> is originally an Arabic name
R	Romokẹ	Moromokẹ	Ronky	A child named <i>Moromoke</i> is believed to have been born by a couple eagerly desirous of a baby
S	Şopẹ	Moşopẹfoluwa	Shopsy	<i>Moşopẹfoluwa</i> means “I give thanks to God.”
	Şoneyẹ	Oşoneyẹ	Shoneks/show	<i>Oşo</i> literally means “Wizardry”, but traditionally it is believed to be related a deity responsible for agricultural buoyancy
	Shobola	Oşhobola	Showboy	
T	Timilẹhin	Oluwatimilẹhin	Timmy	<i>Oluwatimilẹhin</i> means “God is my supporter”
	Tomiwa	Oluwatomiwa	Tommy	<i>Oluwatomiwa</i> means “God has visited me.”

The translations in the table are based on the researcher's knowledge of Yoruba and consultations with some specialists in African Oral tradition and African literature. The bearers' feedbacks were also useful.

Table 2: The syllable structures of original and acculturative Yoruba names

S/N	Original name and syllable structure			Acculturative form & structure	
1	Abiodun	VCVCVC	(3 syllables)	Abbey	VCV (2 syllables)
2	Ajiboye	VCVCVCV	(4 syllables)	Ajiboy	VCVCV (3 syllables)
3	Babalola	CVCVCVCV	(4 syllables)	Babs	CVCC (1 syllable)
4	Bukola	CVCVCV	(3 syllables)	Bukky	CVCV (2 syllables)
5	Bilikisu	CVCVCVCV	(4 syllables)	Billy	CVCV (2 syllables)
6	Damilola	CVCVCVCV	(4 syllables)	Dammy	CVCV (2 syllables)
7	Fakeye	CVCVCV	(3 syllables)	Faks	CVCC (1 syllable)
8	Femi	CVCV	(2 syllables)	Femsy	CVCCV (2 syllables)
9	Ibukun	VCVCV	(3 syllables)	I.B	VC (1 syllable)
10	Jumoke	CVCVCV	(3 syllables)	Jummy	CVCV (2 syllables)
11	Kehinde	CVCVCV	(3 syllables)	Kenny	CVCV (2 syllables)
12	Kayode	CVCVCV	(3 syllables)	Kayus	CVCVC (2 syllables)
13	Kafayat	CVCVCVC	(3 syllables)	Kaffy	CVCV (2 syllables)
14	Morufu	CVCVCV	(3 syllables)	Murphy	CVCV (2 syllables)
15	Romoke	CVCVCV	(3 syllables)	Ronky	CVCCV (2 syllables)
16	Sope	CVCV	(2 syllables)	Shopsy	CVCCV (2 syllables)
17	Soneye	CVCVCV	(3 syllables)	Show	CV (1 syllable)
18	Shobola	CVCVCV	(3 syllables)	Showboy	CVCV (2 syllables)
19	Timilehin	CVCVCVCV	(4 syllables)	Timmy	CVCV (2 syllables)
20	Tomiwa	CVCVCV	(3 syllables)	Tommy	CVCV (2 syllables)

Table 3: Attitudinal disposition of subjects to anglicized Yoruba names

S/N	Assumptions	Agree	Disagree	Strongly agree	strongly disagree
1	You bear a Yoruba name	70%	10%	15%	5%
2	That is not the exact way your peers call the name	60%	15%	15%	10%
3	The abbreviated form sounds like an English name	50%	5%	35%	10%
4	You prefer being called the English way always	35%	25%	25%	15%
5	You prefer to be called the English way in school	5%	5%	85%	5%
6	You prefer the anglicized form when among the Elite	10%	25%	50%	15%
7	You feel unsophisticated when called your full name	25%	25%	25%	25%
8	The original name has deep meaning	40%	5%	50%	5%
9	The Englishized form is meaningless and obscure	60%	5%	30%	5%
10	The abbreviated form hides your cultural identity	50%	5%	25%	20%
11	The original name reveals your cultural identity	75%	5%	10%	10%
12	The Englishized form is preferred for its brevity	65%	5%	25%	5%
13	Yoruba names are often too long and need reduction	50%	20%	15%	15%
14	Englishized forms are used by the Educated people	25%	20%	50%	5%
15	Englishized forms are used commonly by youths	25%	5%	13%	5%

The data collected before the compilation of the list of ‘original’ (the already abbreviated but not Englishized) names of subjects in Table 1, reveal that some of the subjects have become so conversant with the abbreviated forms of their names that they could no longer answer Questions 1 and 2 correctly (see Appendix A: verification task).

Interestingly, findings from interactions reveal that some youths only know they bear *Femi* or *Bukola* for instance, but they could not categorically state whether the full names were *Babafemi*, *Oluwafemi*, *Osunbukola* etc. When casually asked what their names were some of them frequently say *Dammy* instead of *Damilola* or *Oluwadamilola*. Such names are also frequently spelt as *Dammy*, *Femmy*, *Tommy* etc. This aspect is not however part of the current investigation but will make an interesting exposition if studied. The relevant question here is what Yoruba or even Nigerians that use these acculturative, anglicized or Englishized names feel about them. It is becoming rampant even in some formal settings. The next sub-section, explains some of the findings in that regard.

Attitudinal disposition of subjects to Acculturative names

The questions asked and documented in Table 3 were tagged assumptions because the names of the subjects do not seem to be sufficient to predict whether they were of Yoruba or Hausa ethnic affiliations. The researcher’s fears were confirmed by three of the respondents who bear Arabic and not Yoruba names. Names, such as *Tawakalitu*, *Biliki* and *Morufu* were often regarded as being borne by the Yoruba and therefore Yoruba names. However, one of the subjects, *Kafayatulai*, spoke at length on the continued bastardization of Arabic names which ranges from mispronunciation to wrong spellings.

Those who did not agree that they bore Yoruba names were those with the Arabic names. They all confirmed that, although their names were of Arabic origin, they are often assumed and pronounced as Yoruba names. It is noteworthy that a total of 75% of the respondents either agree or strongly agree that their peers do not call them by their original names. This is indicative of the spread of this phenomenon among especially the youth as revealed in Table 2 question 15 of this study. Only 10% of the population disagreed with the fact that the original names have very deep meanings. The implication of the gradual decline in the use of the original forms is that the bulk of cultural meanings represented by the names are also simultaneously being eroded.

Syllabification pattern of acculturative Yoruba names

The analysis of the syllabification patterns of Yoruba and the acculturative forms of respondents’ names in Table 2 shows the phonological influence of English upon Yoruba. In the English language, only a restricted number and type of consonants can occur. Consonants that can occur before the vowel that is in the onset position, in a syllable must not be more than three; as coda that is after the vowel, not more than four. One

thing that is clear from this analogy is that there are several words in English with consonant cluster (many consonants coming together in a string).

This consonant clustering pattern of English is detectable in 5 of the acculturative names in Table 2, (nos.3, 7,8, 15 and16), which is an uncommon feature in Yoruba language. Dauer (1983) discovered that the CVC syllable structure is common in English and records a finding of 34% frequency and 30% for the CV structure. In other words, 64% frequency occurrence takes care of the CVC and CV syllable structure in English. This adequately reveals that the English language possesses quite a number of closed syllables which is not the case in Yoruba. Another very important feature in the Yoruba original names is that there is the predominance of heavy syllables. Syllables that have a rhyme consisting of a long vowel or a diphthong or even a short vowel plus a consonant are called **heavy** syllables. Perhaps the most prominent difference between the Yoruba and few Arabic names and the anglicized ones is the number of CV syllable pattern in each of the names. About 60% of the latter have at least 3 syllables, whereas, 75% of the Englishized or acculturative forms have only two syllables. It is clear that syllable reduction is a prominent phenomenon in Englishized Yoruba and Arabic names.

Socio-phonetic implications of the acculturation of Yoruba personal names

According to Babalola (2000:203), language and culture are interwoven since social integration and development are hardly existent where a group of people have no deep linguistic affinity. Whatever factors may have encouraged the use of acculturative names the fact remains that it is a subtle and unconscious way of making the African or indigenous languages atrophy. Zabus (1991:17) observed that “our native tongue is steadily, though subtly being devoured by another tongue-English,” and our colonizers cannot be held responsible. The average Nigerian youth is beginning to cast as “modern” any name that sounds English and ‘local’ any indigenous name, hence the desire to anglicize the latter.

The syllabic structure of the acculturative forms affects the pronunciation of the names so that some of them sound totally English when they are called. A high percentage of the respondents agree that the acculturative forms cannot effectively reflect the cultural and even ethnic affiliation of the bearer.

Conclusion

The retention of African names in their original forms can help in retaining the already atrophying African cultures and languages. The older generation has continued to preserve the sanctity of the indigenous languages but they are passing out and there seems to be no language legacy they are bequeathing or perhaps that the younger generation is inheriting. The insistence on the actual names of their children being used will certainly not amount to sheer conservatism but a conscious effort at preserving their

culture of which language is an integral part. The acculturation of the names and by extension languages implies the dying or loss of some information and knowledge gained over time in those languages. There is no gainsaying the fact that the English language has come to Nigeria, as to many African countries, to stay. However, the language as a linguistic tool cannot sufficiently bear the weight of the rich African heritage resident in the African names. The 'new generation of youths need to be encouraged to preserve their names and lend curiosity to the English world such that there would be the desire in the 'outside' world to learn to unravel the unending mysteries within the culture of naming in Africa.

References

- Babalola, E.A (2000). "The Linguistic factor in ethnicity and underdevelopment" 198-205. *Journal of cultural studies*, vol. 2, No 1.
- Dauer, R. (1983), "Stress timing and Syllable Timing reanalyzed," *Journal of Phonetics* 11, 51-62
- Gut, U. (2007) *Non-Native Prosody; Phonetic Description and Teaching Practice*, New York: Mouton de Gruyter
- Kachru, B (1986) *The Alchemy of English: The spread, Functions and models of non-native Englishes*, Oxford: Pergamon.
- Soneye T.O. (2003). *English Language as Culture Transmitter: The African Experience*, Occasional Paper No. 16, Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS).
- Zabus C. (1991) *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodohi.
- Gikandi, S. (1991) "The Epistemology of Translation: Ngugi Matigari and the Politics of Language," *Research in African Literature*, vol.2, No. 1, pp 219-230.

APPENDIX A: Verification task

Please attend sincerely to this questionnaire. All information given will be treated with utmost anonymity.

1. What is your full (First) name? _____ (Please do not write your surname)
2. What has your name been reduced to? _____
3. What exactly do people call you? _____
4. Is this the same way your parents call you? _____
5. Is this the name your school mates call you? _____ -
6. Which set of people call you the name to which your original name has been reduced? _____
7. Are you pleased that you are called that way? _____
8. By which of these forms of your name would you always want to be called? _____

APPENDIX B: ATTITUDINAL TEST: 4-LIKERT TEST

Please state whether you agree, disagree, strongly agree or strongly disagree with the following statements by a tick under the selected option

S/N	Assumptions	Agree	Disagree	Strongly agree	strongly disagree
1	You bear a Yoruba name				
2	That is not the exact way your peers call the name				
3	The abbreviated form sounds like an English name				
4	You prefer being called the English way always				
5	You prefer to be called the English way in school				
6	You prefer the anglicized form when among the Elite				
7	You feel unsophisticated when called your full name				
8	The original name has deep meaning				
9	The Englishized form is meaningless and obscure				
10	The abbreviated form hides your cultural identity				
11	The original name reveals your cultural identity				
12	The Englishized form is preferred for its brevity				
13	Yoruba names are often too long and need reduction				
14	Englishized forms are used by the Educated people				
15	Englishized forms are used commonly by youths				