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LINGUISTIC PATTERNS IN PHONE NAMING CONVENTIONS AMONG YOUTHS IN CALABAR*

Benjamin Nyong, Golden Ekpo & Ene Offiong

This study examines the motivations behind young people's use of pseudonyms in their phone contacts, interrogating the various categories of names they assign to their contacts, such as nicknames, romantic pet names, and occupational names. It also identifies the linguistic strategies utilised in creating these names. The work is rooted in sociopragmatic theory, which considers how language use shapes and is shaped by social contexts. Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were conducted with 30 participants aged 18-32 in Calabar, Nigeria. The results show that pseudonyms are used for ease of recall, redefinition of relationships, and individualization, highlighting their significance in communication. The study reveals that mobile phone technology enables youth linguistic creativity which is characterised by humour, clipping, blending, and abbreviation, showcasing their innovative language use. The work concludes that pseudonyms act as enablers for young people to tie others' identities to their subjectivities, reflecting their personal relationships and social context.

KEYWORDS: Phone names; subjectivities; sociopragmatics; youth language; mobile phone; Calabar; personal relationship

INTRODUCTION

The concept of naming is as old as humanity. It is a purely linguistic universal property because every human society uses the concept to individuate and identify its members (Aceto, 2002). Personal names are symbolic in nature and mirror the ideological and social systems of a given society, the deep cultural nuances and significances of a community are overtly enshrined in names and naming system of that community. Naming is an essential component of the society as it is a general statement that frames the attitudes, values, beliefs, emotions and assumptions that are widely known and shared among the society (Goddard, 2006).

Naming, like language, is “a distinct human enterprise” (Essien, 2000:105). It is a common convention that peoples' personality traits, character and behavior are largely influenced by names and naming. To this end, Camden (1984:43) advises that “names should be chosen with good and gracious significations to inspire the bearer to good action.” Young people creatively use onomastic strategies to bestow on people different names in mobile phones. Mobile phone technology enhances youth interaction and participation in personal and social issues. It also encourages linguistic and multimodal creativity (Barton and Carmen 2013) and offers individuals a path towards improving, controlling, reinforcing relationships and self-image (Wakefield 2003). Unlike naming practices that are generated from online interaction in different social spaces, which young people use as an outlet to “writing oneself into being,” (Barton and Carmen 2013:84) the practice of bestowing different identities and references on people other than their original names is rather, 'writing others into being'.

Several studies on youth naming practices have been explored as a source of youth subculture and enterprise (Coulmont, 2014; Falk, 1976; Lujan-Garcia, 2015), as a form of sociocultural identity (Burt, 2009; De Klerk and Lagonikos, 2004) and from other perspectives (Heisler and Scott, 2006; Aleksiejuk, 2016; Mensah et al., 2021). Names on phonebooks have not been studied and have received little or no attention therefore, this work aims to fill that gap. The present study is concerned with how youths in Calabar have mastered that art of exploring mobile phone technology for their self-gratification as manifested in onomastic practices. Naming in mobile phones has distinctive interpretation and communicative value that display dynamism, flexibility and social positioning. This article explores identities assigned to people by peers, colleagues, business partners, strangers, relatives and acquaintances and unpack how this complex but creative practice frames the social realities of the name giver and the name bearer. The present study identifies the social categories of phone names. It further interrogates the motivations for phone names creation and explores the subjective interpretations attached to these names. In addition, the linguistic strategies employed in creating these names are analysed.

Literature review

In the last two decades, the study of personal names in Africa and beyond has received sufficient attention, scholars (Alford 1988; Boluwdaora, 2019) have revealed that names echo the name giver's cultural history, economic status, ideologies, social and political circumstances. This present study diverges from naming in traditional contexts by focusing on the address terms created by phone users to identify other people. Young people use different terms to call their friends, relatives, acquaintances and mates to index solidarity, friendship and intimacy. This justifies Mensah (2022) claim that address terms are vital resources in fortifying solidarity, articulating affiliation, and diverse forms of belonging, while also upholding group cohesion and intimacy. These terms are signifiers of the level of relationship people share with each other indicating the extent of distance presence in the union (Kroger and Wood 1991). Address terms are shaped by different social factors such as age, socio-economic status, sex, religion of both the name assigner and the named. The physical context (school, market, church, workplace) in which the relationship was established also influences the form and structure of names given. Contemporary literature on verbal address terms is enormous but due to the scarcity of literature on written address terms, we consider the former, as the patterns and dynamics involved in creation of these terms are similar. Oyetade (1995) characterises address terms as words and expressions utilised in interactive dyadic and face-to-face scenarios to identify the individual being addressed. Beyond mere linguistic convention, employing a specific form to refer to a recipient fosters social cohesion through shared beliefs, values, and objectives within a particular community of practice or social sphere. Brown and Gilman (1960) assert that such address forms delineate an objective relationship between speaker and addressee (dyad), suggesting a correlation between social structure and group ideology. They introduced semantic guidelines governing address in American English, drawing from diverse datasets. Their findings reveal that the most prevalent forms of address are the first name (FN) and the title plus last name (TLN) in American English, with status and intimacy between speakers emerging as the primary factors influencing address choice. Youths are more inclined to creating new identities for others for the purpose of navigating anonymity and engaging in self-promotion. Eckert's characterization of youth as "linguistic movers and shakers" (1997:52) corroborates this thought.

Young people often showcase their capacity to creatively disrupt and reshape linguistic norms to reflect shared ideologies and local attitudes. Smith (2011) underscores the significant contribution of such creative disruptions to the evolution of language worldwide. Kießling and Mous (2004), and Mugaddam (2009) examine the various linguistic strategies employed by young people to construct and negotiate identity, foster group cohesion, and express solidarity. These strategies encompass morphological and semantic manipulations, code-switching, code-mixing, and lexical borrowing. Storch (2011) emphasizes the playful and innovative nature of these linguistic practices, which often signify transitions and mobility within urban youth cultures.

This research is grounded in the sociopragmatic theoretical framework, a comprehensive approach that examines the intricate relationships between language, culture, and society. This framework, as posited by Leech (1983), emphasizes the significance of social perception in shaping participants' interpretation and performance of communicative actions. The interpretation of meaning within this approach is deeply rooted in specific local conditions of language use, acknowledging that meaning is context-dependent and subject to varying sociocultural influences. In the realm of personal communication, phone names can be seen as a form of linguistic expression that intentionally conveys meaning to the intended audience. The interpretation of these phone names requires an understanding of the complex interplay between linguistic forms, sociocultural context, and situational variables (Harlow, 1990). In essence, the social interpretation of phone names is contingent upon the intersection of social dynamics, shared values, and cultural norms, which collectively contribute to their locally constitutive meanings. This study seeks to explore phone names as discourse practices and tools for communication, predicated on the notion that they possess propositional character, enabling the sharing of meaning between the assigner and the recipient. By examining phone names through the lens of sociopragmatics, this research aims to uncover the mechanisms underlying the creation, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning in personal communication.

Participants and methods

This qualitative ethnographic study involved a two-month data collection process in Calabar, the capital city of Cross River State, South-eastern Nigeria. The study population consisted of 30 young men and women (N=30) with an equal gender ratio, aged between 15 and 32 years. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their willingness to participate and first-hand experience with phone naming. Basic demographic information such as name, age, gender, occupation, education, and place of birth was recorded to understand how these social variables influenced naming practices. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in writing, and the research was approved by the ethical committee of Arthur Jarvis University. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and informal conversations conducted at various locations including playgrounds, game centres, streets, churches, market squares, town halls, and schools. Participants were asked about the reasons, meanings, sources, and perceptions of phone names, with informal conversations allowing for the gathering of additional personal information. Questions also explored the general attitude of those being named and their comfort levels with the names. All interviews and conversations were recorded using a digital audio recorder, while field notes were used to document and annotate respondents' metadata. A total of 175 names were collected from the field, categorized into relevant themes, transcribed, checked for accuracy, and analysed. The conceptual framework focused specifically on phone names, limiting the scope of relevant data gathered. Data analysis utilized a qualitative ethnographic approach to interpret and explain the insights gained from participants' views, opinions, and perceptions regarding phone names.

The Phone contact names

In the analysis that follows, an examination of the categories and motivations for phone names taking into account the narratives behind these names and their sociopragmatic structure is performed.

Nicknames

Nicknames are fluid forms of naming practices used to express social group belonging, status and social distancing in interpersonal relationships. Young people see nicknames as a tool to reinvent their identities, hide identities and confer recognition within their specific in-group or social world. They are symbolic resources that reinforce group membership, solidarity and social cohesion. Name givers and users assign nicknames to indicate their subjective opinions about the name bearers in a certain social context. Nicknames are usually bestowed in addition to bearers' given names (Aceto, 2002; Alford, 1988). They can be both externally or internally sourced. On the one hand, externally sourced nicknames are derived based on the physical, intellectual, social and emotional attributes of the one being named, on the other hand, internally inspired nicknames are derived from several linguistic mechanisms such as reduplication, back formation, clipping, blending, abbreviation of a bearer's given name. The study discovers these two sets of nicknames, which are used as a sign of endearment and acceptance or rejection. Some of the nicknames found in young people's phones are illustrated below

Table 1 Nicknames			
Name	Gender	Source language	Meaning
Donatus	F	English	-
Fuck no pa	M	Naija	-
Ikpa boy	M	Efik	-
Mmaino	F	Efik	-
Pastor	M	English	A clergy
Pope	M	Latin	A clergy
Stock man	M	English	-
Efai	M	Efik	-
T-boy	M	English	-
Biggy	F / M	Naija	Big
Smallie	F / M	Naija	Small
Obuma	M	Efik	Thunder
Ofum one	M	Efik	Whirlwind
Gold digge	F	English	Prostitute
Abokie	M	Hausa	Friend
Tallest	F / M	English	-
Tevez	M	Argentin	-
Afiamma	F	Efik	Fair lady
Nk baby	F	Efik / Engl	-
Idokunam	M	Efik	Wild anim
Escape	M	English	-
Isantim	M	Efik	Hippopota

Personality, attitude, and attributes of bearers of given names informed the nature of nicknames assigned to them. Watzlawik et al. (2016) argue that nicknames are based on displayed characteristics. Names like *donatus* and *fuck no pay* are somewhat sexualized. *Donatus* is given to a woman who can freely donate herself for sexual adventures without necessarily demanding favour in terms of money or any other material benefits for exchange.

There is this particular woman that anything goes. All my guys have chopped (have sex) her, and to make it even more interesting, she does not seek for money like other girls. I thought it was just with me, later I found out that it is the same for everyone, I have her number and I just saved it as donatus since she gives the thing freely. (Male Ndiyo 24)

The assumption given to back up such an attitude by the woman could be that she perceives her actions as a strategy to escape being labelled as a *gold digger*, since the traditional society does not empower her to express her sexual desires without being seen as hunting for material possessions. This ideology is fueled by the representation of women by the enlarged patriarchal structure as inferior and submissive. *Fuck no pay*, is for a man who engages in transactional sex relation and refuses to pay. The name has the sociopragmatic force of strength and power where such a name was bestowed because of a man's recorded exploits in sexual activities. This can be considered as a means of enacting masculinity and dominion over a woman where the man stands to gain it all, on the other hand, the woman is at a loss.

Individuals who are assertive, aggressive, tough and agile with quick reactionary abilities earned names like *Obuma* (thunder), *Ofum one* (whirlwind) and *Idiok unam* (wild animal). The sociopragmatic interpretation of these names is that they are constructed to perpetuate an ideology of dominance, power and control. These nicknames are a representation of strength, self- The person is so called because his attitude is likened to a saint hence the reverential treatment. Names like *stockman* and *efai* also show the behavioural traits of bearers. *Stockman* is given to one who is of a high social standing, dresses well, speaks well and coordinates himself in an enviable humane manner, while *efai* depicts ruggedized attitude, used to represent someone who is out of touch and cares less about physical looks and appearance.

Smallie, *biggie*, *tallest* and *isantim* (crocodile) show physical attributes and appearance. *reliance* and *authority*. They demonstrate some of the perceived attributes associated with men to index dominance. *Pastor* and *pope* are given to one who is religious, pious and sanctimonious. *Smallie* is for one who is short, *biggie* and *isantim* (hippopotamus) is for someone who is fat while *tallest* is given to a fellow with a good height. A participant reported:

As for me I don't even know their names, I don't bother to ask, I just used their sizes (uses his hands to illustrate) to indicate them in my phone, that way it helps me not to forget. Like *Isantim*, he is so big and fat, and likes eating a lot. I simply refer to him as a hippopotamus because he has weight and occupies space. (Effiong Male 27)

Tevez is for one who plays football, he earned the nickname because he is skillful, strong and powerful on the field of play, a direct representation of the Argentine Carlos Tevez who once played for Manchester United football club in England. Most of these nicknames are positive while some are negative, all reflecting the perception of the name givers, the overall acceptance level of the names by the recipients differs; some of them said they were not aware of such labels. This position justifies the claim by Mensah (2017) that nicknames are often bestowed on individuals against their will, and are usually *acceptable* by the user and giver's specialized social world. Other name recipients acknowledged they were aware. The ones who are assigned endearing names see nothing wrong with it while the others with names meant for ridicule do not express or share similar sentiments.

Occupational names

This concept of occupational names, is used as signifiers to identify people, family and generation known for a particular craft and business. It is a well-known phenomenon in some parts of Europe, like in Croatia as far back as the 15th century, the diffusion of occupational names into the mainstream naming practice was a common feature and it is still reflective on the contemporary names. Names like Kovačić, Kovačević and Kovač are used for individuals who were and are blacksmiths.

Table 2
Occupational names

Names	Gender	Source language	Meaning
Peter trouser	M	English	-
Ete garri	M	Efik/English	Garri man
Mma Rice	F	Efik/English	Rice woman
Cab guy	M	English	-
Mr. syntax	M	English	-
Phonology man	M	English	-
Mma enañ	F	Efik	Cow woman
Victor blanket	M	English	-
Ufan trouser	M	Efik/English	Trouser guy
Delivery guy	M	English	-
My hotel plug	M/F	Naija	-
Pant girl	F	English	-
Owo plumber	M	Efik/English	Plumber man
Okon Nepa	M	Efik	-
Koksy ufat idet	M	Efik	Koksy the barber
Ete ayamofon	M	Efik	The man that sells cloth
Recharge card girl	F	English	-
Photocopier	M/F	English	-
George ICT	M	English	-
Ebri Police	M	Lokaa/English	-
Antigha nails	M	Efik/English	-
Alex police	M	English	-

In the data collected, we observed that although this practice is not common as a fluid form for official naming in the studied area, the manifestation of what looks like or could be regarded as occupational names is evident - a case of attaching and linking people's identity to their profession. Participants agreed that those assigned such labels are comfortable with the tags as they consider it as a major source of advertisement where their “market” is being sold.

I do not think I have a problem with it, almost everyone calls me Okon Nepa around this area, it has made me popular and given me jobs beyond my official engagement, I think it is a blessing. (Okon, male 29).

Peter trouser was used to name an individual who owns a local boutique and sells trousers with other assorted wears, *Alex police* was for a fellow who is a police officer, *Etim meat* sells meat in a local market and *Antigha nails* is a manicure and pedicure agent in the community. What is noticeable about this pattern is that they are compound words and the names that appear at the left hand side of the construction are the headwords while the others at the right hand side are simply their modifiers that give information about the source of the derivation.

In this naming pattern, when the original first name of the bearer is retained, or any title is used (*Mr. syntax*) it must be followed by the occupation/profession of the individual. The case is different when a regular common noun is used in place of the original first name to identify an individual. Here, the occupation/profession comes before the common noun like *phonology man* (for one who lectures phonology in the university), *recharge card girl* (for a female who sells recharge voucher), *pant girl* (for a girl that sells female pants and underwear). For these two patterns, we can submit that the former operates on the left hand head rule structure while the latter is a right hand head rule structure. Contrary to the previous opinion stated earlier, some of the people who earned these names expressed dissatisfaction with these tags, especially those engaged in less lucrative occupations. They do this to disassociate with the work as it does not add value to their social status.

Romantic pet names

Romantic pet names are used between individuals who share some form of emotional bond. Such names connote intimacy, fondness, beauty, playfulness and are used to endear people to each other, thereby bringing out and sustaining the love, flair and excitement in their relationships. Because of the enticing force of these names and the general notion people attached to it, they are not used loosely, only those close to heart are considered worthy of such labels. In this regard, people are careful with whom they use these names, in order not to be seen as though “they are forming a commitment of sorts” (Anyanwu, 2017:136).

Table 3
Romantic pet names

Romantic pet names	Gender	Source language	Meaning
Ufan ima	M/F	Efik	Lover
My own	M/F	English	-
My heart	M/F	English	-
Ediye	M/F	Efik	Beautiful/handsome
Babe	M/F	English	-
Sweetheart	M/F	English	-
Angel	F	English	-
Honey	M/F	English	-
Sugar	M/F	English	-
Chocolate	F	English	-
Zuneigung	F	German	Affection
My king	M	English	-
Wifey	F	English	-
Allegria	F	Spanish	Joy
Inem	M/F	Ibibio	Sweetness
Treasure	M/F	English	-
Special	M/F	English	-
Mi amor	M/F	Spanish	My love
Edima	F	Efik	Beloved
Koko	M/F	Efik	Namesake
Cristobal	M	Spanish	Christopher
Sunshine	F	English	-
Oxygen	M	English	-
Liebe	M/F	German	Love
Beau	M	French	Boyfriend

We provide examples of these names in Table 3. Participants show how they attached special sentiments to these names. They consider it the oil in the wheel that makes any relationship thrive. “For me, the people close to my heart, I save their names in a special way, that way it helps to strengthen and bind us together in love” (Ntibi, female 22). Some people are of the opinion that some languages other than English tend to be more accurate in capturing romantic features and realizations. They rather chose to save the names of their loved ones in Spanish, German, French and Efik languages. *Ufan ima* (lover), *Edima* (beloved), *Inem* (sweetness), *Ediye* (beautiful/handsome) are all Efik words. *Mi amour* (my love), *Allegria* (joy) are Spanish. *Zuneigung* (affection) and *Liebe* (love) are German words. These names endowed positive attributes on the named and are usually tied to the nature and character of the bearer (Anyanwu, 2017). In this way, young people use these names as a means to gratify themselves and meet their emotional needs.

The use of metaphors is found in the data presented above; there is a comparison of two unlike elements to build up new meanings and a transfer of word to acquire a new sense different from its literal meaning. *Honey, sugar, chocolate*, are all originally consumables that are re-conceptualized to reflect emotional allusions. Going by the sociopragmatic paradigm, the items correspond to a loving, caring and supportive partner, the idea of this recreation is that the satisfaction derived from consuming the stated items is a reflection of the experiences an individual has or intends to have in a relationship.

Motivation of names

This aspect of this work covers what seems to be the driving force for the creation of such names. The primary motivations for the names reveal the subjective articles that young people attach to names which frames their general perception of others.

Sameness of names

Many people tend to be more comfortable saving names of others in a way that is convenient for them. It is done in a special way that enables them to recall names that are alike and have similar features. To do this, people's names are saved with an addition of a special character attached to the name; it could be a number or an emoticon. *Victor 1, Victor 2, Victor 3* are used to distinguish one individual from another. It can also be used to refer to one person who has more than one contact line. In addition, locations such as workplace, church, school can be used as well to separate similar names. *Uduak UNICAL, Uduak Linguistics, Uduak Church, Uduak main Choir* are examples from our data. The first is someone who works in UNICAL, the second is a student in the Linguistics department, third is a member in church and the last for a fellow that sings in the main choir.

Redefining personal relationship

It is observed that beyond name saving in mobile phones, people tend to attach personal sentiments to how their names are being stored by others, especially loved ones. The expectation of being addressed in a manner that depicts intimacy is a major concern for people. The general belief that the nature of onsite relationships and dealings should be mirrored in phone naming is an indication that the mobile phone technology has become a tool youths use to enhance affection in their relationships.

I broke up with my boyfriend when I discovered how he saved my name in his phone. We met at the ATM point. He saved my name as '*near ATM*'. I felt hurt and thought I could have been treated better. (Alice, female 19).

People tend to save the names of others in an order that shows the level of relationship they have with that person. Names reflecting emotional undertone are meant for those who have shared relationships with the name givers. Participants agreed to the fact that people would have to earn their trust in a certain way before being bestowed a name that is assumed intimate or less official, an indication that phone naming shows social distancing in relationships between people. Name patterns in this regard will be to negotiate friendship and intimacy, indicate equality, inequality, familiarity and unfamiliarity. The way one is named in the phone can change (negatively or positively) as the status of the relationship changes. It is considered that when people are addressed by title and location of meeting, such is least intimate, *Doctor Juliet* is more intimate than *Doctor Calabar*. The former could be for someone that is close, while the latter could be for a stranger.

Linguistic creativity

From the data gathered, it is observed that the names saved in mobile phones are as a result of different output made possible by the use of some linguistic strategies employed by young people.

Humour

Phone names are reflexively framed in humour and participants say it gingers the essential aspect of their social life. The names in this category are used to ridicule, lampoon and mock individuals who are not considered part of the main friendship circle or just outside the inner friendship circle. Female participants tend to have names that point more to humour.

Names like *don't pick*, *wrong number*, *mumu (idiot)* are used to identify people who are persistently seeking friendship and intimacy but are not being treated in the line of their desire. *ATM*, *Breakfast*, *Lunch*, *Outing* are names used mostly by female participants. The use of such names for people is an illustration of conditional love and friendship where the woman is seeking to keep her commitment because of the socio-economic status of the man. It is in the effort and ability of the man to provide food and money that the woman finds solace. This agrees with popular stereotyped gender norms seen in the society where the man is placed and considered as the provider, and the woman the beneficiary. This humour-infused approach to phone naming highlights the importance of playfulness in social interactions, allowing individuals to navigate complex relationships with ease.

Clipping

The strategy of cutting off part of someone's name is utilized in phone naming. The clipped form of the name retains the same meaning as the original name. *Maggi* is used for *Margaret*, *Bless* for *Blessing*, *Vic* for *Victor*, *Jenny* for *Jennifer*, *Chris* for *Christopher*, *Emma* for *Emmanuel*. This use illustrates innovation and economy. Some participants noted that clipping help

Abbreviation

This is also found in phone naming. The initials of people's first names are used to identify them. The usage is because of its wider acceptance level by language users in the studied area. Names like *Nta* are reduced to *NT*, *Nkoyo* becomes *NK*, *Uta* is *UT*, *BB* is for *Blessing*, *UB* is *Ubong*, *AB* is for *Abraham* and *CY* is for *Cyril*, etc. This strategy demonstrates a desire for convenience and speed in communication, reflecting the fast-paced nature of modern life. Abbreviation also allows for a level of privacy, as initials can be used to conceal full names from public view.

Blending

This is quite rare in phone naming and not in full usage as others. What is discovered from data is the blend of people's first name and surname, or a blend of someone's name with his spouse. *Erireks* for *Eric + Rekpene*, *Ekasu* for *Ekanem + Asuquo* and *Globe* for *Glory and Bernard*. This strategy showcases creativity and playfulness, as individuals experiment with different combinations to create new and meaningful names.

Conclusion

This study has explored the naming patterns found in mobile phones among youths in Calabar metropolis, southeastern Nigeria, uncovering the symbolic linguistic resources that serve multifunctional purposes based on the intentions of the namers. We identified the relevant social categories that form the regime of phone names, analysing the subjective meaning, ideologies, and perceptions people ascribe to phone naming. Our analysis, driven by sociopragmatic theory, reveals that phone naming provides a platform for affiliating with others, reawakening friendship and intimacy, and serves as an indirect mode of communication. It also functions as a channel for expressing oneself, writing others into being, and negotiating social relationships. As a peer-shared activity, phone naming offers participants a sense of belonging, pride, pleasure, and solidarity, forging a connection between the name and namer in their social world. Our findings have far-reaching implications for understanding popular culture and informal literacy practices in Nigeria, highlighting the significance of phone naming as a creative outlet and social practice. By examining the linguistic and social dynamics of phone naming, we gain insight into the ways in which youths in Nigeria navigate their social relationships, express themselves, and create meaning in their everyday lives.

NOTES

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