

PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF TIV THEOPHORIC NAMES

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Abstract

The pragmatic study of Tiv theophoric names explores the significance of Tiv names in the lives of their bearers, employing a descriptive research design and unstructured interviews to gather rich, qualitative data. Guided by an ethno-pragmatic approach, the research reveals that Tiv theophoric names play multifaceted roles, acting as performative, declarative, and testimonial utterances that convey spiritual values, experiences, and beliefs. The findings show that these names not only shape the bearer's identity but also facilitate

communication, foster a sense of community, and serve as a witness of one's faith to others. The study concludes that Tiv theophoric names are a vital part of the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Tiv people and recommends further research and documentation of native African names to preserve their significance for posterity. The study contributes to the growing body of research on the pragmatics of names and highlights the importance of understanding the cultural context of naming practices in Africa.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Theophoric names, Tiv language, Naming practices

Introduction

This study explores language in the context of Theophoric names among the Tiv people. Linguists view language as both a **cognitive phenomenon** (a mental faculty) and a **social tool**. Chomsky (2002:9) emphasizes its cognitive dimension, defining language as “a set of finite rules that generate an infinite number of sentences”. In this context, language is an inbuilt capacity enabling humans to produce and comprehend novel utterances beyond mere imitation. On the other hand, Halliday (1978:2) stresses the **social function** of language. He argues that “language is a social semiotic,” meaning it derives its meaning and structure from its role in social interaction and cultural contexts. Language does not exist in isolation but develops within communities and serve multifaceted functions including requesting, establishing connections, expressing gratitude, articulating hopes or aspirations, offering apologies, extending greetings, exerting persuading, and conveying narratives, and Tiv theophoric names embody all such actions.

Names are cultural universals, something all humans have in common, no matter where or when they live. Personal names are more than mere labels; they carry social, cultural, linguistic, and psychological significance. Scholars agree that personal names are linguistic expressions that bear great meaning and are used to refer to individuals for identification within social contexts. They hold great significance, extending beyond mere identification to convey cultural heritage, identity, beliefs, and social context. Personal names often reflect family, traditions, values, and history, shaping the

bearer's sense of self and community. They carry specific meanings, aspirations, or circumstances, providing insight into the bearer's background beliefs and cultural narrative (Olatunji, Issah, Noah, Muhammad and Sulaiman 2015). In many cultures, including the Tiv people, personal names are particularly meaningful, conveying messages, blessings, or ancestral lineage. Ultimately, personal names play a vital role in defining individual and collective identity, fostering a sense of belonging and connection to one's faith and heritage.

It then behooves that, if the very act of naming introduces a person into social existence, the name itself becomes the vessel that carries the meaning of that existence. A name is never devoid of significance. It is the locus of meaning where history, hope, and belief converge. In some climes, this meaning may be an opaque relic of a forgotten etymology, but in some others, especially within the rich cultural deposit of African societies, a name is a vibrant, transparent declaration; it is a story, a prayer, a prophecy, a history, and a philosophy, all abbreviated into a single linguistic utterance. The study of these condensed narratives, onomastics, thus reveals the underlying beliefs and values of a society. Names carry deep cultural meaning, allowing us to tap into a community's collective identity (Olatunji, et al 2015).

In addition to its capacity as a vessel of meaning, a name possesses a potent, active force. The act of naming is a significant linguistic act that has an impact on the world and the individual. It is not merely a description but a performance, often a prescription for a life's path. Names speak of such things as the story of one's birth, the aspirations of the family that the child has been born into, as well as the spiritual inclinations of the community from which the name has been derived. The act of naming the individual is ingrained in a web of relationships and expectations that theoretically shape their identity and journey through life. By the act of naming, the person giving the name positions his/herself as a master craftsman/woman that is weaving many elements together to present matters that have gone past, matters that define the present, and the hope that is projected to define the future. Consequently, the linguist is saddled with the task of unravelling the mixed elements to arrive at the meaning embedded in names.

Tiv refers to both the people and the language. The Tiv language is part of the **Southern Bantoid group** within the Benue-Congo branch

of the Niger-Congo language family (Williamson and Blench, 2000:31). It is estimated to have more than 4 million speakers, making it one of the most widely spoken minority languages in Nigeria (Crozier and Blench, 1992:124). The Tiv people are natives to **Benue State**, in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, with populations across Taraba, Nasarawa, and Plateau States as well as smaller communities in Cameroon. The Tiv people are very religious. Their religious life is a blend of their traditional beliefs and the influence of Christianity and a bit of Islam. Presently, Christianity seems to be the predominant faith.

Theophoric names therefore, are a significant part of Tiv culture in Nigeria. In the Tiv language, names like *Terna* – God has given, *Aondongu* – there is God and *Ushahemba* – the One above is the greatest reflect a deep connection with spirituality, faith and a recognition of the existence of God or a deity who is great and who rules over the affairs of man. These names often express gratitude, hope, or acknowledgement of God's presence in one's life.

In Tiv tradition, theophoric names serve as a way to invoke blessings, express gratitude or trust in God, request help, connect with the divine, apologize for a wrong done, and as a means to pass down spiritual values to children. They also reflect the community's belief in a personal and involved God. Names like *Iveren-iTer* – God's blessings and *Terese* – the Lord has wiped away tears are common, showing how faith is woven into everyday life and identity.

The use of theophoric names in Tiv spans from expressing personal faith- spiritual affirmations to being a way to connect with heritage and community. These names often carry stories, hopes and prayers, making them more than just identifiers- they are passed down generations, preserving culture, they reflect shared beliefs and values of the community, fostering unity and they carry stories and histories that strengthen community bonds

Although a lot has been written on Tiv as a society and a language, scholarly works such as Aor, (2022), Mensah, and Ishima, (2020) and a host of others have focused more on core areas like phonology, morphology, tone, social organization, and religion than on the pragmatic aspect of personal names and, in particular, Tiv Theophoric names. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by offering a theory-

guided, data-driven account of Tiv Theophoric names in context, how they construct identity, how they function as social actions across settings, how their meanings are negotiated in interaction, and how the religious belief influences their selection and uptake. In other words, how Theophoric names function as communicative tools within specific social contexts. Lack of understanding of these complexities may hinder a deeper appreciation of modern Tiv culture, particularly in the dimension of their being very religious; it may also limit our knowledge of the complex dynamics of naming practices in African societies.

This study seeks to examine how Tiv Theophoric names function in communication, beyond their literal meaning uncovering the social, cultural, religious and contextual factors that influence the use and interpretation of these names.

Conceptual Review

Pragmatics

Crystal (1997) considers pragmatics as the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication. Grice (1975) sums up that pragmatics involves the principles guiding conversational implicature, that is, how people understand unstated meaning based on context, particularly through his Cooperative Principle. It therefore means that pragmatics provides understanding of the nuances of how speakers convey meaning, how listeners derive meaning, the actions involved, the influence of context, and the achievement of effective communication. In other words, it sheds light on how language functions in real-life contexts, enabling effective communication. Mey (2009:25-26, quoting Hoyo (2006) introduces the term applying pragmatics. According to him, if pragmatics itself is a 'user-oriented science of language', Applying Pragmatics is a problem-solving activity with an emphasis on using pragmatic knowledge critically, imaginatively, and constructively in the real-world context of the 'social struggle'. He further explains that applying pragmatics aims to develop an awareness of the crucial role that language plays in the construction of individual, group, and societal

identities and the consequences of these ‘constructed identities’ for individual freedoms and the rights of individuals to participate fully in the communities of which they are a part. Exploration of the macro-context, about which all language activity takes place, is the province of ‘societal pragmatics’, with its unique focus on the users of language and the prevailing conditions under which they use language.

Name

Names have meanings, both denotative (inherent) and connotative (implied meaning). Names help us relate freely in social and cultural spheres. We use names to identify ourselves and others, to make the world understandable, and to create order. Aboyi (2010:12) agrees that, while inherent meaning is important to prospective parents, names are normally chosen on the merits of their positive implications. Parents naming their child Barnabas, for instance, often do so in anticipation that he will indeed be a son of encouragement. Aboyi summarises that names are a celebration not only for our humanity, but also a reminder of our individuality that we are uniquely made in the image of God. They are wonderful gifts and lasting testimonies to the beauty of personhood.

Personal Names and Naming Practices

Personal names are unique and specific in providing identity for the bearer as well as revealing intricate links between language, society, and cultural practices, highlighting the connection between names and societal values. Olatunji et al. (2015) define personal names as “a reality of everyday life that reflects the experiences, beliefs, and ideologies of a people.” In agreement, Mensah (2024) asserts that “personal names are markers of religious identity and ideological positioning, serving communicative and symbolic functions in society.” This perspective integrates both pragmatic and sociolinguistic functions, shedding more light on the aim of the current study.

Names as Performances and Indexes

Anthropological and linguistic studies treat names as performances and as indexical signs. Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn (2006) compile cross-cultural analyses showing names to be movable social

resources—changed, concealed, or elaborated to manage relations. Indexicality literature (Silverstein, 2003; Agha, 2007) provide tools to track how name choices and address forms index piety, respect, seniority, or institutional belonging. In West Africa, performative praise-naming (e.g., Yoruba *oríki*) highlights how names interface with genres that explicitly shape social memory and stance (Finnegan, 2012).

Impact of Religion on Naming

Religion has a significant impact on personal names. Many researchers of different religions are of the view that name givers, especially parents, have hopes that their children will turn out good, responsible, and respectful when they bear names imbued with religious values and associated with deities or the divine. Mensah (2024) examined the impact of religion on Tiv names, demonstrating how conversion to Christianity or Islam influences naming practices, with parents incorporating biblical or Quranic references.

Empirical Review

Ideh and Duru (2021). Investigated “The Ethno-pragmatics Analysis of Duru Names among the Igbos”. The study identified two broad categories of Igbo names: given and taken names. The study focused on given names that embody the desires, circumstances surrounding the birth of any child or the challenges facing the family. Taken names reflect more of personality, achievement, ideology, dreams and aspirations of the bearer. The study focused on the latter and specifically on names associated with Duru and compares them with Eze-related names. Data was collected from people who bear names associated with Duru, as well as some selected elders who are the custodians of the culture of the areas where these names are in operation. The qualitative research method was used to translate, analyse and explain the data from the anthropological, semiotic and linguistic perspectives. The data were classified into three major groups: communities, titles, and personal names. The study revealed that, there is a close link between Duru and Eze: the names are solely for males, and more take names than given names. In other words, Eze is synonymous with Duru names, and like Eze, it is a title and honorific name; given to great men, title holders, warriors, and distinguished

men of their time. The study concluded that, every human society has a certain general framework of principles, values and norms or precepts with which people are categorized and placed in the moral schemes of things. It is on such templates that an individual's actions, status, ability, and achievements are rewarded. Title-taking remains culturally important among the Igbos and can only be conferred on highly regarded individuals who have contributed immensely to the community.

Mensah and Ishima (2020) examined sentential names in Tiv. The study avers that, some Tiv personal names have sentential structures instead of just single lexical items. Data were obtained through interviews, metalinguistic conversations, and participant observations in two Tiv-speaking communities: Gboko and Makurdi in Benue State, Nigeria. The study argued that sentential names are not mere referential expressions but also provide a reflection of the grammatical structure of the Tiv language. The study concluded that the structure of Tiv sentential names is not constrained to any particular set of expressions, as they have semantic and pragmatic attributes which denote some extralinguistic realities that also contribute to the organization of Tiv grammar and the mental representation of the native speakers 'linguistic competence'. The study's focus on sentential names and the examination of their syntactic structure contrasts with the current study's interest in Tiv personal names generally and the examination of their socio-pragmatic values and functions.

Ude and Akpan (2017) researched "The Influence of Modernization on Ibibio Naming Culture". The study aimed at examining how modernism has influenced the Ibibio naming culture and, in turn, suggests ways of revitalizing the traditional Ibibio naming system while incorporating new cultural trends. The study employed an unstructured questionnaire to gather data. The findings of the study revealed that typical Ibibio names that reflect the Ibibio culture are no longer given to the Ibibio children in the 21st century, and interaction with the global community is one of the outstanding influences on Ibibio culture. They recommended that a digital documentation of Ibibio names should be performed for evolutionary trace and the sake of posterity. The study focused on unveiling the influence of Ibibio personal names and proffering solutions to preserve them. The gap observed, which the current study seeks to fill, is providing insight

into the importance of context in the interpretation of Tiv personal names.

The three works reviewed are relevant to this study because they express findings about personal names in Igbo, Tiv and Ibibio cultures, granting insight into the principles, values and norms of the various communities which are embodied in the people's names. The studies however, differ from the current study in that, the Igbo and Ibibio cultures are different from the Tiv culture, while the study on Tiv on the other hand focuses on sentential names which are a mixture of different categories of names in Tiv differing from the current study which focuses on Theophoric names.

Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative approach, which involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data. Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. The non-structured interview method was used to elicit Theophoric names from Tiv native speakers, while already existing literature and documents containing personal names were consulted for content analysis. A total of twenty (20) names were collected. The descriptive and interpretive designs are employed to analyse Tiv Theophoric names pragmatically. Data is presented in tables, and the names are analysed using the ethno-pragmatic approach.

Data Presentation and Analysis

A pragmatic analysis of Tiv Theophoric names seeks to examine how these names function in communication, beyond their literal meaning. It aims to uncover the social and cultural. Religious and contextual factors that influence the use and interpretation of these names.

Table 1: Tiv Theophoric names playing performative roles

| S/NO. | NAME | LITERAL MEANING | PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION |
|-------|-------------------|---------------------|---|
| 1. | <i>Sughshater</i> | Trust in the Lord | The bearer and others should imbibe the act of trusting in the Lord |
| 2. | <i>Chirter</i> | Worship the Lord | The bearer and others are to worship the Lord |
| 3. | <i>Dondoter</i> | Follow the Lord | The act of following the Lord should be carried out by the bearer and others. |
| 4. | <i>Kerter</i> | Search for the Lord | The bearer and others should be seekers of the Lord |
| 5. | <i>Sonter</i> | Ask the Lord | The bearer and others are to have a lifestyle of asking from the Lord |

The Theophoric names in Table 1 serve as potent communicative tools in interpersonal communication and social interaction. They convey spiritual values, beliefs, and experiences that can shape relationships and interactions with others. When individuals bear names like *Sughshater*-trust in the Lord, *Chirter*-worship the Lord, *Dondoter*-follow the Lord, *Kerter*-search for the Lord, and *Sonter*-ask the Lord, the names can be seen as performative acts or speech acts that convey a specific message or attitude, such as devotion, commitment, public declaration of one's faith, and the attitude of seeking that requires performance. In interpersonal communication, these names may encourage others to ask questions about the bearer's faith or share their own experience of worship, while in social interaction, these names can facilitate discussions about spirituality and faith, creating opportunities for mutual learning and growth.

Therefore, these names can be seen as performative acts that shape

the bearer's identity, influence social interactions, and convey spiritual values. By bearing them, individuals can express their faith and values, potentially inspiring others and creating opportunities for meaningful connections and focused conversations.

Table 2: Tiv Theophoric names playing declarative roles

| S/NO. | NAME | LITERAL MEANING | PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION |
|-------|-------------------|--------------------|--|
| 1. | <i>Msooter</i> | I love the Lord | a declaration of love for God |
| 2. | <i>Terkator</i> | The Lord is king | A declaration of God's rulership |
| 3. | <i>Aondohemba</i> | God is great | A declaration of God's greatness |
| 4. | <i>Aondofa</i> | God knows | Affirmation, declaring confidence in God's power and omniscience |
| 5. | <i>Sewueseter</i> | We praise the Lord | A declaration of praise for God |

Table 2 shows Theophoric names that play significant declarative roles. These names are declarative statements that explicitly convey the bearer's faith, values, and experiences. Names like *Msooter*-I love the Lord and *Terkumaiwuese*- the Lord is worthy of praise are personal declarations of devotion and worship. Those like *Terkator*-the Lord is king, *Aondohemba*-God is great, and *Aondofa*-God knows, are declarations of God's attributes and characteristics, God's kingship, His greatness, reverence to Him, and confidence in Him. By bearing these names, individuals publicly express their love and praise for God, affirm their trust and confidence in God's power and omniscience, express their identity and values to others, which can inspire others and create a sense of community among like-minded individuals. In social interactions, these names can serve as conversational starters, allowing the bearer to share their personal experiences and faith with

others; they also reveal the bearer's values and spiritual leanings. On the whole, these names are declarative acts that convey the bearer's faith, values, and experiences.

Table 3: Tiv Theophoric names functioning as a form of witness or testimony

| S/NO. | NAME | LITERAL MEANING | PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION |
|-------|--------------------|--------------------------|--|
| 1. | <i>Terdem</i> | The Lord has forgiven me | A personal experience of God's forgiveness and a testimony for others to experience the same |
| 2. | <i>Ayimase</i> | He (Lord) has saved us | The experience of salvation by the bearer or members of his/her family |
| 3. | <i>Teryima</i> | The Lord saves | A testimony of the saving power of God |
| 4. | <i>Ternguhiden</i> | The Lord is returning | A declaration and reminder of the Christian belief in the second coming of Christ |
| 5. | <i>Erdoona</i> | His (Lord) goodness | A testimony of God's goodness |

Table 3 shows Theophoric names that function as a form of witness or testimony in interpersonal communication and social interaction. Names like *Terdem*-the Lord has forgiven me, and *Ayimase*-the Lord has saved us, testify to the parents, giver or bearers' personal experience of forgiveness and salvation. *Teryima*-the Lord saves can be a powerful witness to others, emphasizing the importance of faith and trust in God to save; *Ternguhiden*-the Lord is returning serves as a reminder of the Christian belief in the second coming of Christ and the importance of being prepared for God's return. *Erdoona*- the

Lord's goodness testifies to God's character and faithfulness; the name can be a declaration of trust and gratitude, expressing the giver or bearer's appreciation for God's goodness in their life. These names serve as a public declaration of the bearer's faith and trust in God, God's forgiveness and salvation, and the importance of being prepared for Christ's return. In both interpersonal and social interactions, these names can convey a sense of confidence, faith, and hope, potentially inspiring others to reflect on their own spiritual lives.

Table 4: Tiv Theophoric names functioning as identity formation

| S/NO. | NAME | LITERAL MEANING | PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION |
|-------|------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. | <i>lember</i> | Joy | A life full of joy |
| 2. | <i>Iveren</i> | Blessing | A life of being blessed |
| 3. | <i>Mhoonum</i> | Mercy | A life filled with experiencing mercy |
| 4. | <i>Msurshima</i> | Comfort | A life of comfort |
| 5. | <i>Iwuese</i> | Rejoice | A life full of rejoicing |

Table 4 shows Theophoric names that foster identity formation. Names like *lember*-Joy and *Iwuese*-Rejoice convey a sense of positivity and joy, potentially influencing the bearer's outlook and interactions with others. These names serve as reminders of the importance of joy and gratitude in the lives of the bearers, shaping their identity and relationships with others. Others like *Iveren*-Blessing and *Mhoonum*-Mercy express the significance of being a blessing to others and experiencing God's mercy. Also, the name *Msurshima*-Comfort suggests a sense of peace and comfort in the midst of challenges, providing reassurance and confidence, shaping the bearer's identity and interaction with others. By embracing these names with their significant meanings, individuals can develop a stronger sense of identity and purpose, potentially leading to more meaningful relationships and interactions.

Discussion of Findings

The study of Tiv Theophoric names reveals the multifaceted roles these names play in the lives of their bearers. The research highlights four key areas where these names have significant pragmatic implications: performative roles, declarative roles, functioning as a form of witness or testimony, and identity formation. The study shows that Tiv Theophoric names, like *Sughshater*-trust in the Lord and *Chivirter*-worship the Lord, play performative roles, publicly declaring the bearer's faith and values. These names are not just labels but actions that convey a message, influencing how others perceive and interact with the bearer. Names like *Msooter*-I love the Lord and *Aondohemba*-God is great play declarative roles, explicitly stating the bearer's devotion, faith, and experiences. These declarations can inspire, encourage, and prompt meaningful conversations with others. The research also highlights how Tiv Theophoric names, like *Terdem*-the Lord has forgiven *Ayimase*- the Lord has saved us, function as a form of witness or testimony, sharing the bearer's personal experiences and faith with others. These names can spark conversations, inspire curiosity, and create opportunities for meaningful connections.

The study also revealed that Tiv Theophoric names like *Iember*-Joy and *Iveren*-Blessing play a significant role in identity formation, shaping the bearer's values, outlook, and relationships. These names can influence how individuals perceive themselves and interact with others, fostering a sense of purpose and spiritual identity. The study demonstrates the significant pragmatic implications of Tiv Theophoric names, highlighting their role in shaping identity, facilitating communication, and serving as a witness to others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the profound significance of these names in the lives of their bearers. The study has demonstrated that these names are not just mere labels but carry deep meanings and implications that shape identity, facilitate communication, and serve as a witness to others. They performative, declarative, and testimonial roles, conveying spiritual values, experiences, and beliefs. These names have the power to inspire, encourage, and prompt meaningful conversations, fostering a sense of community and shared

understanding among believers.

This study highlights the importance of understanding the cultural and spiritual context of names in shaping identity and relationships. By exploring the pragmatic significance of Tiv Theophoric names, we gain insight into the rich cultural heritage and spiritual practices of the Tiv people and appreciate the role of names in shaping human experience.

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