

Modern faiths and the Yoruba language: Reconfiguration of the Yoruba Lexicon

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Abstract

Language mirrors culture; and belief systems are part of culture. The advent of modern faiths has systematically affected the use of the Yoruba language in its attempt to serve its purpose of propagation in the modern religions (Christianity and Islam) discourse, especially to non-literate adherents who are not proficient in the English and Arabic languages which are respectively the languages in which the faiths are proclaimed. Conversely, the Yoruba language is affected resulting to reduction in the use of lexical items relating to indigenous faiths. The same fate has bedeviled the Yoruba personal naming system where names whose morphological structures are Yoruba, have meanings that reflect modern faiths sensibilities. However, names with indigenous faiths connotations are no longer given to children at birth. Rather, we have reminiscences of them as surnames. Woefully, in most cases, modern faiths adherents even change or adjust their family names to further distance themselves from indigenous faiths. Using the Lexicalists' theory of Generative Morphology, this paper interrogates these issues and presents the lexical additions and percolations as well as semantic maneuvers, inclusive of names, culminating in the contemporary Yoruba lexicon.

Key words: modern faiths, indigenous faiths, Yoruba language, reconfiguration, lexicon

Introduction

Modern faiths are taken in this presentation as Christianity and Islam. Indigenous faiths are however the belief system practiced by the Yoruba as handed down by their ancestors, and still practiced by some but not as overtly and openly practiced as witnessed for Christianity and Islam. Because language mirrors culture, and the Yoruba belief systems, which is an integral part of the culture, has been expanded by the addition of modern faiths imported through British colonialism and the Jihadist movement for Christianity and Islam respectively, the Yoruba language lexicon has been systematically reconfigured to reflect the influence of the languages of these modern faiths through extensive and intensive use. This paper will interrogate the impact of English and Arabic languages, which are languages of the modern faiths on the Yoruba language in communicative use on the one hand and on Yoruba personal naming system on the other.

The Yoruba Language

With a large number of native speakers across West African states, Yoruba is one of the three major languages of Nigeria, and a prominent language with a great influence in the socio-cultural and religious lives of millions of people outside Africa. Prominent among them are

Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago and Haiti. Yorùbá, along with Hausa and Igbo, has the status of a national language in Nigeria. It was so legislated by the National Assembly in Section 55 of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria. The bulk of the speakers is in Nigeria. It is spoken mainly in Lagos, Ondó, Kwara, Ògùn, Èkìtì, Òyó and Òsun States as well as in parts of Kogí and Edo States. The speakers are contiguously located in southwest Nigeria (Adétugbo, 1967), (Awobuluyi, 1998), (Adeniyi, 2005). By the 2006 census projection, the population of the speakers within Nigeria could be put at thirty-six million (36,000,000), close to one-fifth of the population of Nigeria. Speakers who use it as a second language could be conservatively put at one hundred million (100,000,000) across the globe. It also has the status of a national language in the Republic of Benin.

Along with Hausa and Igbo, Yorùbá was prescribed in the National Policy on Education (2004:5, 10, 11 & 14) as a language to be used as a medium of instruction in pre-primary and primary schools and to be studied as a second language in junior secondary schools in Nigeria. The government of Lagos State of Nigeria recently promulgated the Yoruba Language Preservation and Promotion Law, which makes the language an acceptable means of communication between individuals, establishments, corporate entities and government in the state. The status of Lagos state as the commercial hub of Nigeria will give this law the capacity to be replicated in other Yoruba speaking states in no distant future. Again recently, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has adopted the Yoruba language as one of her codes of broadcasting.

Yoruba language has been exposed to rigorous academic research. It is now employed as a medium of instruction at all levels of education. Masters and Doctoral theses are presented in the Yorùbá language in most universities in South-west Nigeria. Creative writers abound in the three main areas of literature in Yoruba: poetry, drama and prose. Several oral genres such as prose, poetry and drama have been documented in the Yoruba language. Textbooks, newspapers, journals, magazines and general books in the Yoruba language are a major boost to the publishing industry in Nigeria today (Yusuff, 2008). Of the three major Nigerian languages, Yoruba enjoys the heaviest use and patronage in home videos and filming by Nollywood.

The Yoruba Lexicon and Modern Faiths

Simply put, a lexicon is the information about the words of a language as mentally possessed by the speaker of a language. These information include knowledge of the use, meaning and pronunciation of the words, and they are not static. For a native speaker, the information commences from birth and continues to load as age advances. But for a second language learner, it starts from the point of exposure to learning. In the literature, distinction is made between the speaker's lexicon and the language lexicon. The former is peculiar to the speaker of a language and variables such as age, life experience, educational status, social status among others determine the nature of its content. However, the language lexicon is the aggregation of the speakers' information on the words of a particular language (Chomsky

1965), (O’Grady & Archibald 2009). It serves as data for the compilation of a dictionary which is the main task of a lexicographer.

This paper considers the Yoruba lexicon as an embodiment of the influences of the modern faiths on speakers’ lexicon and proceeds to expose such cumulative effects on the language lexicon. It is in two parts: effect of the English and Arabic languages on the Yoruba lexicon as a result of discourse on Christianity and Islam religions; and the effect of these modern faith-induced languages on the naming system of the Yoruba.

Lexicalists’ Theory of Generative Morphology

The suitability of this theory to analyse these data is based on the fact that it recognizes that the word’s formal composition is lexical in nature and that the extent of its exposure to syntax determines its wholesomeness in the lexicon or whether it will be subjected to generation. (Chomsky 1970, Halle 1973, Lieber1992).

Words in the Lexicon

The Yoruba lexicon is expanded by the following examples consequent upon Christian and Islamic discourses.

- 1. Iléyá:** (lit: it is time to leave for home) = Id-el-kabir (Moslem festival). Most Moslems seize the opportunity of this festival to visit their hometowns from urban centres and other locations where they earn their living. They also fix important meetings and occasions to coincide with that festival. Most sons and daughters who are even non-moslems are usually expected home. Most Yorùbá towns and villages are harmoniously multireligious. This term is coined from a fuller expression: Ilé yá láti lọ sọdún wa (It is time to leave for home to celebrate our festival). This subgroup has the habit of fixing other ceremonies such as freedom, naming, introduction, engagement and building foundation or roofing to coincide with Iléyá (Id-el-kabir) because they like to flaunt their achievements in the urban centres to their kinsmen and relations also on visit and to those domiciled in the towns and villages.
- 2. Pẹpẹ:** This is used to refer to “**altar**”. In traditional Yorùbá architecture, it is a suspended wall shelf on which valuables like china plate, earthenware and jewelry are kept by women. It has been transferred in meaning to refer to ‘altar’ where spiritual valuables are kept in the Christian church.
- 3. Wòlù “prophet”** derives its origin from Arabic **Waliy** which means ‘spiritually-gifted.’ This has been domesticated and incidentally refers to prophets especially those serving in white-garment Christian churches. It is intriguing that we don’t have Islamic **Wòlù**, but then Arabic is not Islam. It is of course the language in which the Holy Quran was revealed. **Waliy** is used instead in Islam.
- 4. Kólà “collar”:** This is used to mean pastor’s or reverend’s white collar.
Witness: Ségun ti gba kólà
P.N. Perf. Asp accept collar
Ségun has accepted a collar = Ségun has been ordained a reverend.

It is observed to have emanated from this sub-group. In the source language i.e. English, it has broad meaning of the folded part of a dress around the neck. The same subgroup refers to other forms of collar especially, of a shirt as ‘pólò = collar, whereas ‘poloneck’ refers to a turtleneck only in the English language. This peculiar switch of words and their meanings in the English language is a reflection of the level of education of this sub-group. Their competence in the use of the English language is not adequate. Most of them are incipient bilinguals.

àdùrà + kí + àdùrà → àdùràkádùúrà

prayer infix prayer any/bad prayer

5. **Àníyàn (an-niyat (Arabic) = intention.** This term is borrowed and interpreted into the Yorùbá language from the Arabic language. Arabic became a language of contact with Yorùbá through the Islamic religion. Arabic is the language in which the Holy Quran was revealed. Islamic adherents are enjoined to worship in the Arabic language, although supplications are allowed in the native languages of the worshippers. The researcher is a Moslem. In Islamic belief, actions are judged by intentions. This makes the word to be significant, not only to Moslems but also to Yorùbá non-Moslems. Although, the Yorùbá word for ‘intention’ is **èròngbà** ‘intended thought’, speakers seem to prefer the borrowed **àníyàn** to it. An-niyat has been subjected to the phonological structure of the Yorùbá language to yield **Àníyàn**. It has been so deeply integrated that some Yorùbá speakers would argue that it is an indigenous Yorùbá word.

6. **Ribá (Arabic language) = usury or interest (on loan):** This term has been domesticated to mean ‘bribery’ among the Yorùbá. The Yorùbá language has indigenous words such as *àbètélè*, *owó èyìn* for ‘bribery’. Preference for **ribá** is probably due to its short form when compared to the two indigenous words. The three words are simultaneously used for the same sense, but ‘**ribá**’ undoubtedly enjoys the highest patronage.

Àlùjànnú ‘al-jinn’ (Arabic) = spirit. The Yorùbá language has ‘òrò’ as the indigenous word for spirit. **Àlùjànnú** is more commonly used by speakers. It is also used for rascally and carefree persons. For example, someone is described as: *Àlùjànnú èyàn tí ñ wakò lóòkùn* ‘A mysterious person that drives a car in the dark’.

7. **Sánmò ‘sàmawáátì’ (Arabic) = heavens.** This term is borrowed from the Arabic language to describe the sky. Only the first two syllables are borrowed. Even those have been subjected to the phonological structure of the Yorùbá language. **Sámà** **sánmò**. The bilabial nasal consonant [m] has assimilated its nasality in the two vowels on both sides. The Hausa language borrowed the first two syllables without modification. In Hausa, aircraft is called ‘**girgin sama**’ transport of the sky’.

8. **Àsàlátù ‘as-salat (Arabic) ‘worship’**

oní + àsàlátù → alásàlátù

agent worship Islamic propagandist (particularly women)

9. **Àlùfáà:** Originally, **'al-fun'** 'one thousand' from Arabic language. Moslem clerics are called Alfa, implying that one alfa is equal to one thousand non-alfa men. It is borrowed into the Yorùbá language as Àáfáà 'moslem cleric'. Àlùfáà is equally borrowed in this form to refer to a minister of a Christian church. The distinction is always clearly made between Àáfáà 'moslem cleric' and Àlùfáà 'Christian minister' by both the media and other speakers of the Yorùbá language.
10. **Ìdáméwàá 'tenth part' = tithe:** Even though this term enjoys general acceptability, it has been endorsed by the media also. Every month, a Christian faithful is enjoined to give a tenth of his salary to the church. If he is in business pursuits, he is enjoined to give one tenth of his profit to the church.
11. **Àbòlọrẹ 'gift on return'**= A unisex name given to a child born on return of a Moslem pilgrim from Mecca. It is not an Islamic/Arabic name. It is Yoruba in composition but only given by Moslems.
12. **Arówáàsí 'one who echoes preaching' = Preaching assistant:** Among the Yorùbá, peaceful co-existence exists among Christians, Moslems and traditionalists. Each of the cultures of these faiths are well tolerated. Islamic culture includes the echoing of the statements of the preacher by his assistant. Perhaps it is also a way of teaching the assistant the art of preaching. **Wáàsí** is the Arabic word for 'preaching'. The assistant who does the echoing of the voice of the preacher is called **Arówáàsí**. A school of thought believes that it is in tune with the relationship which existed between Moses (Musa, Arabic) and Aaron (Haroon, Arabic) in the Bible and Quran. Aaron echoed Moses because was reported to be a stammerer. The same tradition is witnessed in the Islamic worship where the Imam (lead cleric) is echoed by the Ladan (supportive cleric). The word **'ìwàásù'** in **Christian tradition which means 'sermon' is also traceable to 'wáàsí'**. **Àjínde 'resurrection' = Easter:** This term is coined to describe the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead after his crucifixion. This is the essence of Easter in the Christian faith.
13. **Kérésimesì 'Christmas':** This is a loan word from the English language. It is phonologically integrated into the Yorùbá language. It is sometimes clipped to **'kérésì'**. The Christmas festival is well celebrated among Yorùbá Christians. Believers in other faiths join them in the celebration.

Naming and the Yoruba Lexicon

The scientific study of personal names is onomastics, even though in some circles, it is also known as anthroponomastics in order to distinguish it from the study of place names which is toponomastics (Crystal 1996: 112).

Personal naming system indigenous to the Yoruba was generally one sole name given to the person at birth. If the person has more than one, they all belonged to that person. Distinctions such as first name, surname or family name came with the colonial administration. In Yoruba culture, names of one's father and grandfather only came up in praise poetry. One is not overtly

described in term of first, middle and last or surname. Also, western education legislated the system further when pupils had and still have to be registered in that fashion. Literatures however abound in naming systems across cultures globally.

With modern faiths came Christian (Biblical) and Islamic names, which are domesticated into the Yoruba language by agreement the linguistic structure of the language. For example:

14. i. Ruth → Rúùtù
- ii. Paul → Pòòlù
- iii. Luqman → Lukumoonu
- iv. Ibrahim → Búremo

Naming in traditional Yoruba society are denominated mainly by reference to indigenous faith, circumstance of birth, professions, chieftaincy stools among others.

Consider the following in this connection:

15. *By reference to indigenous faith:*

Sangobunmi Sango ‘god of iron’ has given me

Ifabiyii Ifa ‘god of wisdom’ has begotten this

16. *Circumstance of birth:*

Ige- breech birth

Tayewo-1st of a set of twins

17. *Professions:*

Odesanya ‘The hunter god has compensated my adversity’

Onawumi ‘This family of craftsmen delight me’

18. *Chieftaincy:*

Oloyede- Here comes a chief

Adedotun- The crown (royal lineage) has been renewed

For a more detailed study of Yoruba personal names, contact Babalola, A & O. Alaba 2003.

However, this paper is concerned with the scenario of names, though in Yoruba, but influenced by the Christian and Islamic faiths in composition and meaning. Names in this category are hinged on God and His properties as upheld in the modern faiths.

Consider the following examples:

19. i. AanuOluwapo- ‘God’s mercy is abundant’
- ii. Opeyemi- ‘I should be grateful (to God)

- iii. Oluwanifemi- ‘God loves me’

Beyond this, some become so entrenched in their modern faiths beliefs that they result into changing their family names mostly used as surnames to further demonstrate their loathness of indigenous faiths.

Examples such as the following are not few:

20. i. Ogunjinmi ‘god of iron forgives me’ → Olujinmi ‘God forgives me’
ii. Ifadiyimu ‘god of wisdom took hold of this’ → ‘Oluwadiyimu took hold of this’

One is left to wonder whether converting some indigenous names whose meanings suggest features to which God is not worth aspiring will not amount to sacrilege? Consider these examples:

- iii. Oguntoyinbo ‘god of iron is as great as the whiteskin’ → *Oluwatoyinbo ‘God is as great as the whiteskin’

Ignorantly, some indigenous faith-based names are acceptable to modern faiths practitioners because they misconstrue their meanings to portray their idea of God. Consider the following examples:

21. i. Obáfẹmi (indigenous) ‘Obaluaye/Sonponna-god of small-pox’ loves me.
ii. Obáfẹmi (modern faith) ‘The Almighty God/King loves me’.

The ambiguity here is resolvable with what the prefix ‘Oba’ means to each group. This gives a modern faith person who bears this name a reason not to bother to modify the name or even change it entirely. Hardly do the contemporary Yoruba person give names with indigenous faith coloration to children. This could be traceable to the fact that modern faiths are prevalent, even when a sizeable number of those who openly profess modern faiths still pay nocturnal visits to the indigenous faith priests for spiritual assistance. Even the few that still practice, though may give, do not overtly call them by the names.

Due to the aforementioned, the onomastic lexicon of the Yoruba language has adjusted tremendously, resulting in reduction of the indigenous faith-based names and consequent increase in the modern faith-based Yoruba composed variants.

Effects of Modern Faiths Induced Words on the Yoruba Lexicon

Lexical Additions

Lexical additions are motivated mainly by the formulation of new words for new notions and ideas, in this case modern faiths such as Christianity and Islam among the Yoruba. New words are derived through certain strategies. Principal among them are coinages in form of description and sound imitation, intuitive substitution and borrowing which could be integrated or domesticated, and also basic or derivative. The data above could be accounted for as follows:

By description: This is the description of an item or thing.

22. Iléyá and Ìdáméwàá (details earlier stated). Modern faiths induced names are generally coined through description.

By borrowing (integrated): This is a kind of loaning where the meaning is the same as in the source language. Examples are:

23. Keresimesi, Alufaa, Asalatu, Sanmo, Alujannu, Aniyan, Wolii (details earlier stated)

By borrowing (domesticated): The meaning of the loaned word here portrays a sense different from that of the source language. This is rare. An examples is:

24. Riba, (detail earlier stated).

By borrowing in derivation: this is a situation where the loan word serves as stem or root in a derivative process. Consider Arowaasi (detail earlier stated).

- | | | | |
|-----|----------|------------------------|--------|
| 25. | a | ró | wáàsí |
| | agentive | echo/expatiate/recount | sermon |

Semantic Manipulations

This is a potent strategy through which old words are given any of new, enlarged or narrow meanings. An example that comes readily to mind is *Pepe* (detail earlier stated). The meaning of this indigenous word has been enlarged from ‘wall shelve’ to ‘altar’ in Christianity.

Lexical Percolation

This is a systematic reduction in the use of words, to the extent that some speakers often refer to them as lexical loss. It is important to mention this because most of the percolation are traceable to the incursion of the modern faiths. This is so much so because most of the names of animals, plants and costumes are used as ingredients and tools in indigenous faith practices. They are rarely used in everyday Yoruba language. These words get not totally lost but percolated in use.

26. Names of animals and birds

- | | | | |
|------|--------|---|---------------------|
| i. | Irò | - | Gorilla |
| ii. | Ìkookò | - | Hyena |
| iii. | Età | - | Civet cat |
| iv. | Òfú | - | Pelican bird |
| v. | Àparò | - | Partridge/bush fowl |

27. Names of Plants

- | | | | |
|-----|--------|---|----------------|
| i. | Ògàn-ó | - | Benin mahogany |
| ii. | Afàrà | - | Shingle wood |

- iii. Àsùnwòn - Ringworm shrub
- iv. Ìròsun - Camwood
- v. Réré - Wild coffee

28. Names of traditional costumes

- i. Gbérí ode - Hunters' outfit
- ii. Gbáriyè - Outing dress
- iii. Agbádá - Outing dress (flowing gown)
- iv. Sapara - Outing dress of a peculiar pattern
- v. Òyàlà - Outing dress of a peculiar pattern

This has constituted a huge damage to the knowledge of the Yoruba fauna, flora and even costume, all of which have become unpopular simply because of their traditional appeal. Persons who adorn themselves in traditional Yoruba dresses are misconstrued to be adherents of indigenous divinities, especially when they are worn outside formal ceremonies or outings.

Conclusion

The Yoruba lexicon has been examined through the prisms of modern and indigenous faiths. It is observed that faiths as social features play a significant role in the quality and quantity of the items in the lexicon. Words get structured for frequency of use through what interest speakers most. Modern faiths in form of Christianity and Islam have had and are having tremendous influence on the content of the Yoruba lexicon. Because speakers are more inclined towards practice of modern faiths, words relating to them enjoy more patronage than those relating to indigenous faiths which are not as popular. The same fate applies to names as has been illustrated in this work. The question that is begging for an answer is: Have we not thrown the baby away with the bath water?

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