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ON THE SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS OF NOMINAL COMPOUNDS 
IN YORUBA PERSONAL NAMES

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1. The traditional view that the behavior of nominal compounds is almost entirely unsystematic and therefore not subject to rigorous analysis (Jespersen, 1942:6.143) has now been clearly replaced by at least two different theoretical views of the subject, each attempting a formal analysis of the syntax and semantics of nominal compounds: one argues their derivation from underlying sentential paraphrases and finite semantic predicates, while the other favors the functional negotiation of the semantic relations between compounded elements.

Though they differ in several respects, the analyses of nominal compounds provided by Lees, by Li, and by Levi, among others, typify a theoretical tradition which assumes that nominal compounds are based on a rather restricted set of underlying semantic relationships. In particular, Levi (1978:50) who provides the most exhaustive study of complex nominals in English claims, among other things, that (i) complex nominals are all derived from an underlying NP structure containing a head noun and a full S in either a relative clause or NP complement construction; (ii) complex nominals are all derived by just one of two syntactic processes: the deletion or the nominalization of the predicate in the underlying S; and (iii) any given complex nominal is inherently and regularly ambiguous over a predictable and relatively limited set of possible readings.

In contrast to the generative-semanticist position that these claims suggest are the analyses of nominal compounds by Zimmer, by Downing, and by Kay and Zimmer. These workers suggest that neither the semantic relation between the two nouns nor the overall meaning of the compound is explicitly signalled at any linguistic level but rather evoked and left for negotiation between speaker and hearer. Within this tradition, Zimmer's (1971) work marks a pioneering attempt to shift the focus from lexicalized, attested, and familiar compounds to novel compounds and the conditions under which they are created. Downing (1975, 1977) takes this functional approach in her ingenious study of the creation and use of nominal compounds in English. A major claim in Zimmer's work is that nominal compounds function primarily as naming devices which pick out particularly salient categories of the speaker's experience. Downing endorses this claim and goes further to stress the distinction between the naming function of nominal compounds and the asserting function of their sentential paraphrases.

In their recent formulation of the semantic structure and function of nominal compounds, Kay and Zimmer (1976) suggest that "the
prototypic use of nominal compounds is to narrow the semantic coverage of the head noun to a smaller class." However, they argue, since neither the semantic results of the narrowing nor the semantic relations between the two nouns is explicitly stated at any linguistic level, there is no reason to suppose that a finite list of semantic predicates or underlying paraphrases will be sufficient to supply the ungiven information. Consequently, Kay and Zimmer suggest that the formal semantic structure of nominal compounds be represented as follows:

(1)

```
NP
  /\     /
 N₁  S   N₁  Nj
   |   /   |   |
  V  head evoked head modifying
     noun relation noun
```

The most interesting thing about this structure is that the V-node of the complement sentence dominates essentially nothing as no particular relation is specified between the two nouns in any given compound.

In the present paper, I examine the syntactico-semantic structure and naming function of nominal compounds by analyzing a productive subset of Yoruba personal names. Attested Yoruba personal names of the form N + N are analyzed and compared to ordinary, attested nominal compounds in the language. Another set of data comprising personal names derived from VP nominalizations are then compared to those derived from N + N compounds. The results show that the syntax and semantics of personal name nominal compounds and of ordinary nominal compounds in Yoruba are similar (with the former drawing more from cultural and symbolic structures than the latter), but completely different from those of verb (phrase) nominalizations. Consequently, they can not both be derived from similar underlying structures. In particular, the results show that N + N compounds in Yoruba regularly exhibit syntactico-semantic characteristics which lead us to reject the analyses of nominal compounds, e.g., by Lees, by Li, and by Levi, which suggest their derivation from underlying sentences or clauses in the same way that verb (phrase) nominalizations are accounted for.

2. Besides its more obvious function which is the differentiation of individuals, personal naming in Yoruba is another way of talking about what one experiences, values, thinks, and knows in the real world. Consequently, the construction of Yoruba personal names is based on systematic cultural principles and the coding of information into them is based on the lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic rules of the language.

Three basic sociocultural principles underly the construction of Yoruba personal names. First is the home context principle
which defines the nature and context of the special circumstances (social, economic, political, religious, sentimental, etc.) on which a given personal name is based. Secondly, there is the positive sanction principle which allows for the elimination of socially unacceptable information from personal names. By eliminating negatively sanctioned home contexts such as witchcraft, disability, criminality, etc., this principle supports the incorporation of only socially valued information in personal names. This allows namers to focus on highly valued objects, events, or social positions; e.g., Ọyọ "happiness", Ọlọ "honor", Ọfẹ "love", Ọwo "money", Ọdẹ "crown", etc., which, as we shall see, form recurrent themes in Yoruba personal names. The motivation for the third principle—the generality principle—hinges on the socio-pragmatic requirement that identification labels be brief. The generality principle permits the abstraction from a multiplicity of events (statable in several sentences) of short generalizations which can then be used in personal name construction. Since Yoruba personal names are used to associate persons with socially and psychologically salient events, the generality principle helps to eliminate ephemeral and specific information, making it possible for negatively valued events to be "buried" or eliminated completely through the use of short generalizations. Such generalizations can take the form of sentences or nominals.

Suppose, for example, that x is a wealthy man who recently became the president of a popular local club. Suppose also that there is another man y who is a pauper and so financially (and socially) incapable of joining the club. Suppose further that each of these men had a baby, x at the height of his fame and y at the height of his poverty. Because of the Yoruba preference for positive expectations and high values, the rich man can give to his new baby any of the names below:

(2a). Olowogbade olówó gba ade' owner-of-money get crown "the wealthy gets the crown (i.e., the best of everything"

b. Ajenusi aje ni 'usí money have fame "wealth epitomizes fame"

c. Okeowo òkè + ọwo' bag + money

d. Afolayan a (= ẹni tí ó) fi ọlọ yan NOMINALIZER (one who) use- honor -march "one who walks honorably"

An interesting aspect of the operation of Yoruba personal naming principles is that y, the pauper, can give any of the above names to his child. When this happens, personal names are used to focus on desirable positive values or experiences that the namers lack at the moment of naming. By associating his child with experiences that
are antithetical to his current situation, y is able to make a
social comment both on his undesirable situation and on society in
general. In any case, the important point here is that the x and y
story and the names in (2) illustrate the application of the socio-
linguistic principles underlying the construction of Yoruba perso-
nal names, though in a rather simple way.

3. Depending on the amount of information being signalled,
Yoruba personal names can be derived from nominals or full senten-
ces of varying degrees of complexity. This means that Yoruba per-
sonal names are constructed from two basic syntactic rules:6

(3) Nominal \rightarrow Name
(4) Sentence \rightarrow Name

For example, (2)a and (2)b are derived from sentences, while (2)c
and (2)d are derived from nominals. In the application of the
Nominal \rightarrow Name rule, nominal can be realized as (i) a simple noun,
(ii) a compound noun, or (iii) a verb (phrase) nominalization.
Because of the general syntactic and semantic classification of
personal names (they are NPs or head nouns in sentence structure,
referring uniquely to certain individuals and functioning as agents
or patients of predicates), the Nominal \rightarrow Name rule appears to be
the most general rule of personal name construction in all cultures.
The most common application of this rule, however, views a nominal
as a proper noun, such as the British or American John, which has
no morphological or syntactic complexity. Conventional linguistic
theory explains the structure of personal names mainly in terms of
this simple process.

In Yoruba, however, personal names derived from simple nouns
are very few and they constitute a limited subset of Yoruba perso-
nal names known as oruko amutorunwa ("name brought from heaven"),
e.g.,

(5)a. Ojo  child born with the umbilical cord
twined around its neck
b. Dada  child born with curly hair
c. Ajayi  child born with its face downwards during birth

Each of these names is made up of a single morpheme and has a unique
cultural meaning which corresponds to the special birth circumstance
for which it stands. Though amutorunwa names are very few, the list
of Yoruba personal names derived from nominals is infinite because
of the productive capacity of nominalizations and compounding.

When Yoruba personal name nominal is of the form N1 + N2, two
attested nouns drawn from the general lexicon are combined to form
a personal name. However, there are severe restrictions both on the
choice of nouns and their combination. Only the major restrictive
factors will be mentioned here. First, the choice of nouns must be
motivated by the sociocultural considerations discussed in the pre-
ceding section. Secondly, only nouns having cultural or symbolic significance apart from their ordinary semantic denotations can be selected. Thirdly, given \( x \) as \( N_1 \) and \( y \) as \( N_2 \) in the personal name construction \( N_1 + N_2 \), \( y \) must be accorded equally high or higher social value than \( x \)--at least according to the namer's value hierarchy at the moment of naming. Furthermore, a definite structural relationship exists between the two nouns: \( N_1 \) must function syntactically as head of the noun phrase while \( N_2 \) must function as qualifier. Thus the higher social status that may be accorded \( N_2 \) is compensated by the higher structural status accorded \( N_1 \). Finally, the referents of both the head and the qualifying member of the compound must bear some clearly perceivable relationship. In other words, no suitable compounding relationship can exist between two nouns where their co-occurrence is definitionally or pragmatically precluded (Downing, 1977).

As we shall see, nominal compounds are particularly effective in Yoruba personal name construction because of their function in picking out relevant categories of the namer's past, potential, or desirable experience and in doing so without making any assertions. (6) below offers some clear examples of attested Yoruba personal names of the form \( N_1 + N_2 \).

(6)a. Ōkẹowo Ọkẹ + ọwọ "bag + money"
b. Adeọla ade + ọlá "crown + honor"
c. Ọdunayọ ọdún + ayọ "year + happiness"
d. Òyínọla oyin + ọlá "honey + honor"
e. Olaolu(wa) olá + olú(wa) "honor + God"
f. Ẹniitán eni + ìtàn "person + story"
g. Oriade orí + adé "head + ade"
h. Ẹniọla eni + ọlá "person + honor"
i. Akinade akin + adé "valor + crown"
j. Èbunọla èbùn + ọlá "gift + honor"

I have not suggested a single meaning for any of the above compounds because (i) no semantic relation is explicitly signalled between any two members of any one compound; and (ii) the list of interpretations with different semantic relations holding between the two members in any one compound can be extended indefinitely. Indeed, given the wide range of variation in human experience and in home contexts that can motivate a given Yoruba personal name, it should not be expected that any personal name nominal compound should have one monolithic meaning. Let us, for example, consider some possible interpretations of Ọkẹowo, (6)a [also (2)c]. For the purposes of this paper, we may interprete Ọkẹowo as bag so-named because it can be any of the following:
(7) "bag of money"
   "bag for storing money"
   "bag in which money is kept"
   "bag in which money can be kept"
   "bag that is filled with money"
   "bag for transferring money"
   "bag used by Banks for customers dealing with large sums of money"
   etc.

The 'etc.' indicates that the list can be extended indefinitely as argued for the interpretations of finger cup in Kay and Zimmer (1976). But the interesting thing about the above interpretations is that Òkeovo, as a personal name, does not mean any of them. We shall return to this in a moment.

In the meantime, let us consider the semantic implications of Òke ówọ as an ordinary nominal compound. The following sentence (8) uttered by the Treasurer of a local farmers' cooperative union at a committee meeting shows that Òke ówọ is an attested nominal compound:

(8) Òke ówọ nàa ti n’gbo' bag money the is -ing wear "The 'money bag' is getting worn"

Depending on context and the degree of shared knowledge between the speaker and his audience, any of the interpretations in (7) can be suggested for Òke ówọ in (8). This problem of variable semantic interpretations applies to all attested nominal compounds in the language. The story is different with lexicalized nominal compounds which, like ordinary words, have prototypical meanings. Indeed, as Levi (1975:141) points out, "lexicalization is a result of a historical or cultural process which associates with a given NP only ONE of its numerous possible readings." Thus the possibility of variable semantic interpretation is minimized in regard to the following lexicalized compounds, each of which is interpreted more or less like a single word:

(9a. ile Ọwẹ house + book "school"
   b. ile ayẹ house + life "world"
   c. Ọmọ ọba child + king "prince/princess"
   d. isẹ Ọwọ work + hand "handicraft"
   e. ówọ orí money + head "(income) tax"

There are, of course, numerous nominal compounds in colloquial use which, though not yet lexicalized, have had their possible variable meanings reduced. An example is (10) below whose present meaning is
only metonymically related to the transparent meanings of its members.

(10) ọmọ ile  child + house  "one of us", (i.e., an in-group member)

In returning now to personal name nominal compounds, we would try to answer the following question: What is the semantic structure of the kinds of information coded in personal name nominal compounds and how does it differ from that of ordinary nominal compounds? In answering this question, I would like to follow Keesing (1979) who distinguishes between transparent and metaphorical-symbolic senses of words and suggests how to represent such distinctions in a semantic description. Using data on certain verbs and lexical items from the Kwaio of Malaita, Solomon Islands, Keesing shows how some of the difficulties that beset grammatical theory and lexical semantic descriptions derive from trying to analyze native speaker's linguistic knowledge as a self-contained system. He suggests that a characterization of a people's cosmology, symbolic structures, and cognitive economies is a necessary prerequisite to their lexical semantic description especially since members of a given community often use linguistic signs "to evoke a world of . . . [shared] meanings that express, presuppose, and are motivated by cultural assumptions" (pp. 21-22)

Going back to Ọkọwọ, let us examine in some more detail how cultural-symbolic information is encoded in Yoruba personal name nominal compounds and why such information remains opaque to the uninitiated. Earlier in (7), we saw a variety of possible interpretations of ọkọ wọ. But these are interpretations derived from possible evoked relations between the two members of the compound and their possible semantic representations. When Ọkọwọ is used as a personal name, these various interpretations conjure a composite symbolic category: the image of "wealth" or "riches". As true of many societies, the symbols of wealth among the Yoruba include the ownership of prestigious cars and big houses, and membership in "elite" clubs or local associations. Used as a personal name, Ọkọwọ evokes these symbols severally or jointly in the mind of the hearer though namers may attach particular importance to particular symbols. Moreover, the sociocultural implications of these symbols vary according to the nature of the motivating home context. For example, if the child of a wealthy man is named Ọkọwọ, the symbols of wealth conjured by the personal name may be those currently enjoyed by the family. However, as pointed out earlier, if the same name is given to the child of a pauper, the conjured wealth would be nothing more than a desired state. Furthermore, if Ọkọwọ is the child of a robber, then the child's name is an attempt to cover up the father's negatively sanctioned occupation. Stretched this far, Ọkọwọ loses its transparent meaning.

So far, we have (both implicitly and explicitly) identified four levels of meaning for Ọkọ + wọ: (i) the level of transparent meaning of each member of the compound; (ii) the level of evoked semantic relations between the two; (iii) the level of cultural-
symbolic structures conjuring series of relevant images in the mind; and (iv) the level of the motivating home context which specifies the events that trigger the choice of the compound as a personal name. A semantic description of Yoruba personal name nominal compounds can be made on the basis of this four-layered semantic representation which is presented diagrammatically as (11).

(11)

In addition to the major restrictions on personal name nominal compounding processes, an important difference between them and ordinary nominal compounds is that the former draws more on cultural and symbolic assumptions. Thus while ordinary nominal compounds hardly go beyond level 2 in (11) above, personal name nominal compounds must include levels 3 and 4. However, in both cases, meaning has to be negotiated as the semantic relations between compounded elements or between them and symbolic structures is not explicitly stated at any linguistic level.

4. The various cultural constraints discussed so far also distinguish personal names derived from verb (phrase) nominalizations from similar nominalizations used in ordinary conversation. However, the same syntactic processes apply to their construction. Yoruba nominalization processes are very rich and productive (see, e.g., Ekundayo, 1976). Discussion here will be limited to the use of the low-tone prefixes /a/- and /l/- as well as the mid-tone prefix /a/- in verb (phrase) nominalizations commonly used in the construction of Yoruba personal names. The names in (12)a – e below are nominalizations of the verb compounds in (13)a – c respectively, making use of the low-tone prefix /a/-.

(12)a. Abikẹ́
   `a
NOM(inalizer) bear pet
bí`

?"one who is born to be petted"

b. Ariyọ́
   `a
NOM see pet
rí`

?"one who is joy to see"

yọ́

c. Abẹ́kẹ́
   `a
NOM beg pet
bẹ̀

?"one who people beg to pet"

kẹ̀

d. Ajani
   `a
NOM struggle have
jà

?"one who is owned through struggle"

nì́

e. Adukẹ́
   `a
NOM scramble pet
dù`

?"one who people scramble to pet"

kẹ̀
(13a)  bí + kẹ  
    bear (child) + pet
b.  rí + yọ  
    see + rejoice
c.  bè + kẹ  
    beg + pet
d.  jà + ní  
    struggle + have
e.  dù + kẹ  
    scramble + pet

As indicated by the + sign, the two separate verbs in (13)a – e are compounded through similar syntactic processes as used in the construction of nominal compounds, and with similar semantic implications of an evoked relation between the two verbs in each compound. This means that, as in nominal compounds, there is considerable semantic freedom of relation in verb compounds in Yoruba. For example, the following interpretations of the name Ariyọ (12)a exist and they are motivated by the variable interpretations of the semantic relations between the two verbs in the compound:

(14a)  ènì tí ó jè ohun ayọ látì rí  
        "one who is joy to see"

b.  ènì tí ó mú ayọ wà fún ènikèni tí ó bá rí i  
    "one who brings joy to whoever sees him"

c.  ènì tí a rí tí a sì yọ  
    "one who makes us rejoice on or as a result of seeing him"

d.  ènì tí ó fẹ kì awọn tí ó bá rí`oun  wà nínú ayọ ní igbà gbogbo  
    "one who wants other people to be always happy each time they see him"

e.  ènì tí a rí yọ  
    can mean any of the above.

Given this variety of interpretations, it can now be seen that the glosses provided in (12) above are quite arbitrary. Indeed, the question mark in front of the glosses in (12) is put in anticipation of the data in (14).

However, a different kind of explanation has to be advanced for names derived from verb phrase nominalizations using the mid-tone prefix /a-/ as in (15).

(15a)  Abíqodun  ènì tí a bí sì`nú qódún  
        "one who is born during a festival"

b.  Abóqọrèn  ènì tí ó bá qófè rìn  
    "one who walks in the company of hunters"

c.  Abíqọna  ènì tí a bí sì`qọna  
    "one who is born on the wayside"

d.  Ajibkekè  ènì tí ó jí bá ọkè  
    "one who wakes to find petting"

e.  Afọlabi  ènì tí a fí ọlá bí  
    "one who is born with honor around him"
Structurally, the names in (12) are different from those in (15). The former are derived from verb compound nominalizations whereas the latter are derived from verb phrase nominalizations. For example, prepositions and nouns occur as VP constituents in (15) while the VPs in (12) are simply verbs only. The distinction made here between verb compounds and verb phrases has important semantic implications. While the range of interpretations of the names in (12) is theoretically infinite, the presence of verb phrases in (15) allows for the narrowing of the meanings of the names to those suggested in (15). Let us illustrate with one example, (15)d. Through some contraction and deletion processes, the VP ba ́ikê (V + N) becomes bike. This is in turn juxtaposed with the single verb ji. This complex is then nominalized by the prefixation of /a-/ to derive the name Ajibike. The presence of the noun ́ikê makes the verb structure a verb phrase rather than a verb compound. But more importantly, the noun ike gives the verb phrase a clear semantic focus.

The story is slightly more complicated with the use of the low-tone /i-/ in the nominalization of verb structures in the construction of Yoruba personal names, e.g.,

(16)a. Ifeolu(wa)  i(NOM) + fe(love) + Olu[wa](God)
?"the love of God"

b. Ibukunola  i(NOM) + bu-kun (add-more) + olá (honor)
?"an increased allotment of honor"

From the surface structure alone, one would have expected that the VP of (16)a would be fe Olu. If this were the case, (16)a would be derived from (17).

(17)  Mo fe'Olu  "I love God"

However, this is not the case because (17) is not an acceptable interpretation of the Yoruba personal name in (16)a. On the contrary, if the baby so named is viewed as a symbol of God's love for its parents, (16)a can be interpreted as a derivative of (18) whose underlying S is (19).

(18)  Ìfè tí Oluwa ní fún mi  "love which God has for me"

(19)  Oluwa fẹ mí  "God loves me"

Given this derivational interpretation, the surface form Ifeolu (16)a is derived from the nominalization of the verb fe in (19) by the prefixation of /i-/ which is then juxtaposed with the diminutive form (Olu) of the subject NP of the sentence (19).

However, this is not all the story. Since, like Olu and olá, ìfè and ibukun are regular nouns in the language (many regular nouns in Yoruba are derived from verb [phrase] nominalizations), it is possible to regard Ifeolu and Ibukunola as nominal compounds. If they are so regarded, then each of them will be open to various
semantic interpretations. Consequently, the meaning stated for Ifeolu above will be one of several possibilities. The fact that Oluwafoami (19) exists simultaneously with Ifeolu as a personal name in Yoruba suggests that the two names have different pragmatico-semantic implications. Oluwafoami is a declarative sentence, Ifeolu is not a sentence; the former is assertive, the latter is not. But more importantly, the latter may not, after all, be derived from the former.

5. The syntactico-semantic structure of nominal compounds proposed by Kay and Zimmer (1976), and represented as (1) above, accounts for the basic structure of nominal compounds in Yoruba. Unlike a sentence or a sentential paraphrase which asserts, a nominal compound should be viewed as a concatenation of two nouns naming or symbolizing in a somewhat hierarchical order of salience, some relevant, nameable, categories of the speaker's experience. Since the constraints on nameable categories are more cultural than linguistic, we surely need to incorporate more cultural information in the description of nominal compounds and other lexical semantic categories than hitherto realized or permitted by conventional linguistic methodology.

The syntactico-semantic structure of verb phrase nominalizations is different from that of nominal compounds in several respects. For one thing, verb phrase nominalizations do not all derive from the same source structure and so can not be accounted for in the same way (cf. Levi, 1978). Secondly, each verb phrase nominalization has a focused interpretation; this is particularly so in Yoruba where proper nouns, function words, etc., participate in their construction. Thirdly, verb phrase nominalizations seem to favor particular clausal or sentential derivations. However, while paraphrase relationships between verb phrase nominalizations and their underlying clauses or sentences are derivational, paraphrase relationships between a given nominal compound and its numerous clausal or sentential interpretations can not be derivational. They are different phenomena and can not both be accounted for in terms of a finite set of semantic predicates and underlying clauses or sentences.

NOTES

1. This paper is in its preliminary version. But I wish to acknowledge the influence of Paul Kay who drew my attention to the implications of my data on Yoruba personal names for the issues discussed in this paper. I may soon regret that I am yet to make the paper available to him and others for comments.


4. Kay and Zimmer (1976:31) have a specific example at the bottom of the tree.

5. For a fuller discussion of these principles, see Akinnaso (1981).
6. For further details, see Akinnaso (1980) and Ekundayo (1977).

7. I use verb compound to characterize the kind of verb groups in (12) where nothing else occurs with the verbs except the nominalizer. Verb compounds, of course, are the simplest examples of verb serialization whose syntactic and semantic structure is still the subject of much controversy in African linguistics.

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