

On the Syntax and Semantics of Nominal Compounds in Yoruba Personal Names

Author(s): F. Niyi Akinnaso

Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1981), pp. 1-12

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

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

F. Niyi Akinnaso

University of Ife, Nigeria
and
University of California, Berkeley¹

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.

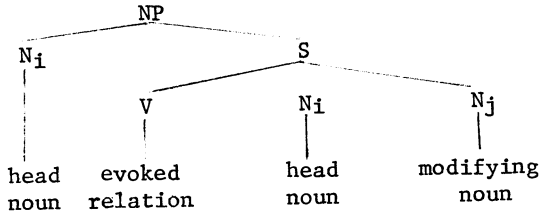
Though they differ in several respects, the analyses of nominal compounds provided by Lees, by Li, and by Levi, among others, typify a theoretical tradition which assumes that nominal compounds are based on a rather restricted set of underlying semantic relationships.² In particular, Levi (1978:50) who 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.³ 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:⁴

(1)



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.⁵ First is the home context principle

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 sociolinguistic principles underlying the construction of Yoruba personal 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 sentences of varying degrees of complexity. This means that Yoruba personal names are constructed from two basic syntactic rules:⁶

(3) Nominal → Name

(4) Sentence → 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 → 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 → 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 personal names known as orukọ àmútorunwá ("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 àmútorunwá 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 N₁ and y as N₂ in the personal name construction N₁ + N₂, 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: N₁ must function syntactically as head of the noun phrase while N₂ must function as qualifier. Thus the higher social status that may be accorded N₂ is compensated by the higher structural status accorded N₁. 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 N₁ + N₂.

(6)a.	Ọkẹowo	ọkẹ́ + owó	"bag + money"
b.	Adeọla	adé + ọlá	"crown + honor"
c.	Ọdunayọ	ọdún + ayọ	"year + happiness"
d.	Oyinọla	oyin + ọlá	"honey + honor"
e.	Olaolu(wa)	olá + olú(wa)	"honor + God"
f.	Ẹniitan	ẹni + ìtàn	"person + story"
g.	Oriade	orí + adé	"head + ade"
h.	Ẹniọla	ẹni + ọlá	"person + honor"
i.	Akinade	akin + adé	"valor + crown"
j.	Ẹbunọla	ẹbùn + 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 interpret 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 Ọkẹowo, 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 ọkẹ owo 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 ọkẹ owo is an attested nominal compound:

- (8) Ọkẹ owo nâa ti n' gbó 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 ọkẹ owo 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:

- | | | | |
|-------|---------|--------------|-------------------|
| (9)a. | ilé iwé | house + book | "school" |
| b. | ilé ayé | house + life | "world" |
| c. | ọmọ ọba | child + king | "prince/princess" |
| d. | isẹ ọwọ | work + hand | "handicraft" |
| e. | owo 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) $\text{om}\text{q il}\acute{\text{e}}$ child + house "one of us", (i.e.,
an in-group member)

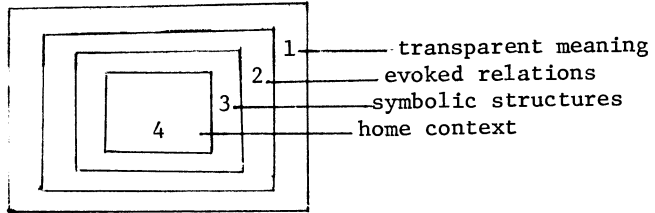
In returning now to personal name nominal compounds, we would try to answer the following question: What is the semantic structure of the kinds of information coded in personal name nominal compounds and how does it differ from that of ordinary nominal compounds? In answering this question, I would like 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 Okeowo, 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 $\text{ok}\acute{\text{e}} \text{ow}\acute{\text{o}}$. But these are interpretations derived from possible evoked relations between the two members of the compound and their possible semantic representations. When Okeowo 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, Okeowo 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 Okeowo, 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 Okeowo 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, Okeowo loses its transparent meaning.

So far, we have (both implicitly and explicitly) identified four levels of meaning for $\text{ok}\acute{\text{e}} + \text{ow}\acute{\text{o}}$: (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 /à-/ and /ĩ-/ 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.	Abikeḡ	à		bí	ké	?"one who is born to be petted"
		NOM(inalizer)		bear	pet	
b.	Ariyọ	à	rí	yò		?"one who is joy to see"
		NOM	see	pet		
c.	Abẹkẹ	à	bẹ	kẹ		?"one who people beg to pet"
		NOM	beg	pet		
d.	Ajani	à	jà	ní		?"one who is owned through struggle"
		NOM	struggle	have		
e.	Aduké	à	ḡ	kẹ		?"one who people scramble to pet"
		NOM	scramble	pet		

- (13)a. bí + kẹ́ bear (child) + pet
 b. rí + yẹ̀ see + rejoice
 c. bẹ̀ + kẹ́ beg + pet
 d. jà + ní struggle + have
 e. ò + kẹ́ 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.⁷ 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:

- (14)a. ẹ̀ni tí ó jẹ́ ohun ayọ̀ láti rí
 "one who is joy to see"
 b. ẹ̀ni tí ó mú ayọ̀ wá fún ẹ̀nikẹ̀ni tí ó bá rí i
 "one who brings joy to whoever sees him"
 c. ẹ̀ni tí a rí tí a sì yẹ̀
 "one who makes us rejoice on or as a result of seeing him"
 d. ẹ̀ni tí ó fẹ́ kí`awọ̀n tí ó bá rí`oun wà nínú ayọ̀ ní`igbá gbogbo
 "one who wants other people to be always happy each time they see him"
 e. ẹ̀ni tí a rí yọ̀
 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).

- (15)a. Abiọ̀dun ẹ̀ni tí a bí sí`nú ọ̀dún
 "one who is born during a festival"
 b. Abọ̀dẹ̀rin ẹ̀ni tí ó bá ọ̀dẹ̀ rìn
 "one who walks in the company of hunters"
 c. Abiọ̀na ẹ̀ni tí a bí sí`ọ̀nà
 "one who is born on the wayside"
 d. Ajibikẹ̀ ẹ̀ni tí ó jí bá`ìkẹ̀
 "one who wakes to find petting"
 e. Afọ̀lábí ẹ̀ni tí a fi ọ̀lá bí
 "one who is born with honor around him"

semantic interpretations. Consequently, the meaning stated for Ifeolu above will be one of several possibilities. The fact that Oluwafemi (19) exists simultaneously with Ifeolu as a personal name in Yorub suggests that the two names have different pragmatic-semantic implications. Oluwafemi 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.
2. Lees (1960, 1970); Li (1971); Levi (1975, 1978).
3. Zimmer (1971); Downing (1975, 1977); Kay and Zimmer (1976).
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.

REFERENCES

- Akinnaso, F. Niyi. 1980. The sociolinguistic basis of Yoruba personal names. *Anthropological Linguistics*. 22:275-304.
- Akinnaso, F. Niyi. 1981. What's in a name?: a new look at an old question. *Names*. in press.
- Downing, Pamela. 1975. Pragmatic constraints on nominal compounding in English. Unpublished master's thesis, University of California at Berkeley.
- Downing, Pamela. 1977. On the creation and use of English compound nouns. *Language*. 53:810-842.
- Ekundayo, S. A. 1976. An alternative to lexical insertion for Yoruba complex nouns. *Studies in African linguistics*. 7:233-7:233-260.
- Ekundayo, S. A. 1977. Restrictions on personal name sentences in the Yoruba noun phrase. *Anthropological Linguistics*. 19:55-77.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1942. *A modern English grammar on historical principles*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.
- Kay, Paul, and Karl Zimmer. 1976. On the semantics of compounds and genitives in English. *Proceedings of the Sixth California Linguistic Association Conference, San Diego, California, April 30 - May 1, 1976*. pp. 29-35.
- Keesing, Roger M. 1979. Linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge: some doubts and speculations. *American Anthropologist*. 81:14-36.
- Lees, Robert B. 1960. The grammar of English nominalizations. *International Journal of American Linguistics*. 26, no.3, part II.
- Lees, Robert B. 1970. Problems in the grammatical analysis of English nominal compounds. *Progress in Linguistics*, ed. by Manfred Bierwisch and Karl Erich Heidolph, pp. 174-186. The Hague: Mouton.
- Levi, Judith N. 1975. The syntax and semantics of nonpredicating adjectives in English. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Chicago. Distributed by the Indiana University Linguistics Club.
- Levi, Judith N. 1978. The syntax and semantics of complex nominals. New York: Academic Press.
- Li, Charles N. 1971. Semantics and the structure of compounds in Chinese. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California at Berkeley.