

Socio- Semantic Implications of Gwandara Names and Naming System

Muhammad Mustapha, PhD¹

Ubaidallah Muhammad Bello, PhD² Ahmad Anas Musa³

Abstract

This paper delves into the sociolinguistic factors and semantic implications of Gwandara names and naming systems. It explores how names are given in the Gwandara community, shedding light on the socio-cultural, spiritual, emotional, and psychological meanings attached to names. The research method involves primary data collection from aged parents in the Gwandara community of Shabu, Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, as well as secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and online materials. Contextual and conventional theories of meaning were used as guide for the study. The analysis categorizes Gwandara names into seven main groups based on their significance and origins. The findings highlight the importance of names as identifiers of individual personalities and reflect the unique circumstances or situations surrounding a child's birth. Additionally, the paper discusses the evolving trend of naming practices in the Gwandara community, influenced by factors such as religion. From the findings, it is evident that Gwanara names served as the pointers of the religious belief of Gwandara people, it provides historical reminders, and serve as identity that describe the true behaviour or posture of a person. This study concludes that the significance of names to Gwandara people is beyond mere labels, but a reflection of socio-cultural values, beliefs, and experiences.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Gwandara names, Naming system, Semantic implications, Socio-cultural factors

Introduction

The relationship between language and culture is a very strong one that makes language to be the material part of a man's

culture. Aside being material, it is one of the aspects of culture that is mobile due to its innate attachment to human. It represents the various experiences of man and serves as the most effective vehicle for the communication of ideas and feelings among human race. In the aspect of naming, language is the form that contains the meaning in human names. This paper intends to look at some of the sociolinguistic factors that necessitate the choices of names in Gwandara language and equally look at the semantic implication of some of the names within the context of use and the conventions in the Gwandara speaking community; Shabu. This paper aims to address this gap by examining the socio-cultural, spiritual, emotional, and psychological factors influencing the naming practices in the Gwandara community of Shabu.

History of Gwandara People and their Language

Historically, Kano is believed to be the origin of Gwandara people. The Gwandara people migrated from Kano in about 1476 in order to escape religious persecution or forced conversion to Islam, which had become the religion of the royal court in Kano. Gwandara, under their leader Karshi, who was the son of the then chief, Muhammadu Rumfa were idol worshippers (pagans), hunters like many other citizens of Kano, and of course reared plenty of dogs. So, at the time Islam penetrated and held ground in Kano, as in many other northern cities of Nigeria, Gwandara tradition and culture became a threat to the successful practice and spread of Islam, and their dogs often messed up the Muslim prayer grounds. As a result, the Gwandara people were asked to abandon their idols and embrace Islam (Ayih 55-56, qtd in Mustapha 6).

However, Gwandara people adamantly refused to revert/convert to Islam and hence declared "Gwanda rawa da Sallah" meaning, "dance (idol worship) is better than sallah

(the Muslim prayer)," and had consequently left Kano to be free from forced conversion (the enforcement of Islamic Shariah and fasting by Al-Magili). Hence, the name Gwandara followed them, a short form of the phrase Gwanda rawa da Sallah declared by them (Ayih 55-56, qtd in Mustapha 6).

Concerning the origin of Gwandara language, one legend (which has been massively refuted), arguably has it that Gwandara is a dialect of Hausa (Kano Hausa), not a different language entirely. Following the result of their migration and the environmental factors (where they settled and mingled with other residents or settlers of the places), the dialect has assumed a different form, making it a unique and different language entirely (Ayih 56, qtd in Mustapha 10).

However, the most acceptable of all the legends on the Gwandara origin is that which claims that the language actually started as a debased form of Hausa XE "Hausa" , a jargon (known as *zaurance* XE "**zaurance**"), artificially carved out of their ancestral Habe XE "Habe" language XE "Habe language" (i.e. Hausa), for the purpose of communication among the exodus group, which they developed to help distinguish themselves from their ancestral Hausa clan as they left Kano XE "Kano" in order to escape religious persecution. But today, the language has been standardised and is currently undergoing stringent linguistic codification XE "stringent linguistic codification" as a distinct language XE "distinct language" on its own shore in today's north-central area of Nigeria XE "Nigeria" . This therefore informs the scores of similarities between Gwandara XE "Gwandara" and Hausa languages XE "languages" (Bako 18/1/2013, qtd in Mustapha 24).

According to Shuji, in his treatment of Gwandara language, "Gwandara... belongs to the Chadic branch of Afro-

Asiatic and is very closely related to Hausa" (101). In the same vein, researchers and linguists alike have further clearly shown that Gwandara, like Hausa language, is a West Chadic subgroup of the larger Afro-Asiatic language family (Encyclopedia Britannica online; the Linguist List of 2010 and Lewis, *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, online version) or what Barber, in his 1975 treatment of languages of the world, calls Sudanese-Guinea, Hamito-semitic. So Gwandara language is far more related to Hausa than to any other language because of their connection in both historical and linguistic lineage (qtd in Mustapha 11).

At this juncture, it is imperative to note that "after founding Karshi Chiefdom named after their leader (Karshi), Gwandara Spread to form towns and villages within and outside Nasarawa State amounting to the number over 110". In Nasarawa State, Gwandara are spread in towns and villages in the following local government areas: Karu, Kokona, Lafia, Nasarawa, Keffi, Nasarawa-Eggon, Doma, Toto, Obi, and Keana. In other states of mostly north-central Nigeria, Gwandara are found in FCT Abuja XE "Abuja" (in Karshi [their first Chiefdom] XE "Karshi" , Kurudu XE "Kurudu" , Old Nyanya, Shereti, Burum, Gwagwa, Dutsen Alhaji, Idu Karmo, Karo Majiji, Kabusu and Share); in Niger State, there are Gwandara communities called Angwan Gwandara in Suleja, Sabon Wuse and Aso (both in Tafa LGA). Also, in Kogi State, we have Eguma in Bassange LGA. In Benue State there is Yaruwata (Yerewata) in Guma LGA, and in Kaduna State we have Jema'a LGA and Padan Karshi in Sanga LGA (Ayih 57, qtd in Mustapha 9-10).

For the purpose of this paper, we shall be focusing on Gwandara people found in Shabu, the Lafia North Development Area of Lafia LGA, Nasarawa State.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics, like other subjects, is partly theoretical and partly empirical. What we mean by that is we can't just sit back and think about various aspects of language use. In other words, we can't solely rely on our personal experiences and draw conclusions about the use of language in society. First, because the way we interpret our own experience might not be right since most of us are not consciously aware of the wide range of variations in speech we hear in our everyday lives. And second, personal experiences are a very limited source to generalize about language in society or different societies. We need to go out, explore, collect the data, analyze it, make interpretations and then reach to a conclusion (Ahmad 31).

To be precise, sociolinguists study the relationship between language and society. They explore the social function of the language and the way it is used to convey the meaning. Sociolinguists explain why we speak differently in different social contexts. According to Fishman sociolinguists are interested in knowing "who speaks, which language to whom and when" (56).

Sociolinguistics is the branch of linguistics that investigates the relationship between language and society ((Lyons 326). It explores how language is used in different social contexts and the social functions of language. Sociolinguistic analysis considers factors such as the identity of the speaker, the language being used, the audience, and the situational context (Hymes 54-5 and Gumperz 114). The central focus of sociolinguistics is the study of the use of language by social groups. Sociolinguistics adopts two approaches in the explication of group dynamics in different social settings: these are micro-sociolinguistics and macro-sociolinguistics (Trudgill 74).

Concept of Semantics

According to Charles (18), semantics is the study of "the relations of signs to objects to which the signs are applicable." This is akin to the view of Saussure on meaning. The sign here is related to linguistic thought that is shared among communicants. That is to say, semantics is a science concerned with the relations between signs and their concepts.

Very closely related to the above view is the submission of Lyons (591), where he defines semantics as, "the study of those context- independent meaning elements which are tied to the linguistic expressions, i.e. part of the linguistic signs as such (signs taken roughly in Saussure's sense) and are (considered to be) invariant across all situations of use."

According to Titi (32), semantics, is the "study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences." This view is still not specific as both the referentialists and the conceptualists depend on words and phrases to look at meaning from diverse points of view. Thus, this definition is thrusting on the symbol use for communication. Another scholar, Crystal (2), corroborates on this by defining semantics as the "study of the meaning of linguistic forms." By linguistic forms, he is referring here to the morphemes, words, phrases, clause and sentences that constitute every given utterance in a language.

From the forgoing, we can say that semantics deals with the meaning of words and how they relate to concepts and the world. In the context of names, semantics explores the significance attached to names, including their cultural, emotional, and symbolic meanings.

Speech Community

According to Gumperz (68), a 'speech community' is "any human aggregate characterised by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set

off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage". Gumperz also argues for regular relationships between language use and social structure where he says, "The speech varieties employed within a speech community form a system because they are related to a shared set of social norms" but may overlap language boundaries (69).

Labov (36) explains that "The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms. These norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behaviour, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage."

However, Hudson (58) says that the term 'speech community' misleads "by implying the existence of 'real' communities 'out there', which we could discover if we only knew how...our socio-linguistic world is not organised in terms of objective 'speech communities.'" Furthermore, he holds the view that, "It is impossible to understand the relationships that really matter to a sociolinguist except at the micro level of the individual person and in some cases, only when the individual linguistic item turn out to be too fluid and ill-defined" (58).

Bucholtz (103) adds contrarily that in sociolinguistics, social theory is rooted in the concept of the speech community... a language-based unit of social analysis... indigenous to sociolinguistics (which) is not connected to any larger social theory.

From the foregoing, speech communities are groups of people who share linguistic norms and interact regularly through speech. Different definitions of speech communities emphasize shared language use, social interactions, and attitudes toward language forms.

Concept of Names

Names serve as identifiers for individuals, places, and concepts (Egbe 76). They carry important information about titles, gender, and cultural affiliations. Naming conventions vary across cultures, reflecting societal norms and values (Ahmad 34). In understanding the concept of names, Goffman (43) says name serves as crucial marker of identity, culture, and social interaction. Geertz (72) holds the view that names hold significance to historical legacy and societal norms. Also, Bourdieu (37) holds the view that names play crucial roles in power dynamics and social hierarchy, reflecting patterns of privilege and marginalization. Name is simply an identity tag as opine by John (2).

Methodology

The study utilizes both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected through interviews with aged parents in the Gwandara community, while secondary sources include literature from books, journal articles, and online materials. The collection of primary data was done through the use of tape recorder and the transcription of the recorded audio for presentation. Following the tabular presentation of the data collected from the field, a descriptive approach was used to analyse the data based on their socio-cultural significance.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data collected for this study are presented in the following table, categorizing Gwandara names into seven groups based on their origins and meanings:

S/N	Category	Description
1	Names with spiritual importance	Names expressing traditional beliefs and reverence for the

		divine, such as “Bwallah” (servant of Allah) and “Adeka” (superior in a shrine)
2	Names with emotional importance	Names reflecting emotional connections or circumstances, like “Talle” (support) for an orphan and “Oboshi” (finally here) for a child born after years of barrenness.
3	Names describing physical appearance	Names based on physical characteristics at birth, such as “Yajanja” (fair child) and “Yakusu” (rat child)
4	Names attached to events at birth	Names commemorating events during birth, like “Atose” (a king has been crowned) and “Bako” (visitor)
5	Names describing personality or qualities	Names indicating personality traits or qualities, for example, “Agbo” (strong) and “Matan Kowa” (loved by all).
6	Names identifying the day of birth	Names representing the day of the week a child is born, like: “Teni” for Monday born; “Tala” or “Talatu” for Tuesday born; “Naruba” or “Laruba” for Wednesday born; “Lami” for Thursday

		born; “Juma” for Friday born; “Asabe” for Saturday born and “Ladi” for Sunday born.
7	Names given in the course of a child’s life	Names acquired based on behaviors or habits, such as “Nnyaa” (imitation of baby cry) and “Azuma ze” (preferring idleness).

From the table above, one can see that the Gwandara naming system reflects a rich tapestry of sociolinguistic factors and semantic implications deeply rooted in cultural and traditional beliefs. This analysis delves into various categories of Gwandara names, shedding light on their spiritual, emotional, physical, and contextual significance, alongside their semantic implications.

Names with Spiritual Importance

Gwandara names often carry spiritual significance, manifesting traditional beliefs and reverence for the divine. These names serve as a link between the individual and their spiritual heritage, imbuing them with a sense of identity and connection to their cultural roots. Examples such as “Bwallah” (servant of Allah) and “Adeka” (superior in a shrine) highlight the community’s deep spiritual ethos and the importance placed on faith and tradition within the Gwandara culture. The common sociolinguistic factor responsible for the process and meaning of these kind of names is religion, an aspect of belief that goes with human existence. It is evident that the Gwandara community in Shabu is divided into two major religious factions of Islam and traditional religions.

Names with Emotional Importance

Emotions play a pivotal role in Gwandara naming practices, with names often reflecting profound emotional connections or circumstances surrounding the birth of a child. These names encapsulate the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of parents, as well as the joys and sorrows experienced within the community. For instance, names like “Talle” (support) for an orphan and “Oboshi” (finally here) for a child born after years of barrenness carry significant emotional weight, symbolizing resilience, hope, and familial bonds. And we can all attest to the role of emotion in categorizing community into classes in the African settings. The respondent on the reason for calling a child ‘support’ (Talle) submits that such parents have children but hope to have one that will be the reason why their economic challenges will be put to rest. For the other which is the case of bareness, women who are the bearers of the fruit suffer the most from both the family of the husband and other members of the community. This can create class difference and lower self-esteem to such a barren woman before the arrival of “Oboshi” that will serve as factor for class change in the world view of the mother.

Names Describing Physical Appearance

Physical characteristics at birth often inspire Gwandara names, reflecting the community’s emphasis on individual traits and identities. These names not only describe the physical attributes of the individual but also serve as markers of uniqueness and distinction within the community. Examples such as “Yajanja” (fair child) and “Yakusu” (rat child) highlight the intricate relationship between physical appearance and naming conventions in Gwandara culture. The former says much about the complexion of the child being fair, while the latter speaks of the size of the child being small.

Names Attached to Events at Birth

Gwandara names frequently commemorate significant events or circumstances surrounding the birth of a child, serving as reminders of cultural heritage and historical narratives. These names often celebrate auspicious occasions or acknowledge the challenges overcome during childbirth. Names like “Atose” (a king has been crowned) and “Bako” (visitor) exemplify how birth circumstances influence naming practices and contribute to the rich tapestry of Gwandara cultural identity. The day “Atose” was born is the day the king of the community was born or on the day of the king’s coronation anniversary. For the name “Bako”, the child must have been born the day a visitor arrived the house.

Names Describing Personality or Qualities

Personality traits and qualities are intricately woven into Gwandara names, reflecting societal values and aspirations. These names not only define individual characteristics but also serve as aspirational ideals within the community. Names like “Agbo” (strong) and “Matan Kowa” (loved by all) highlight the importance of virtues such as strength, compassion, and communal harmony within Gwandara society. Some of these names, when they portray good qualities or traits, they serve as pride to the bearer and represent not only the history of the named person, but the history of his family and the generation to come.

Names Identifying the Day of Birth

The day of the week a child is born holds special significance in Gwandara culture, with names often symbolizing the day of birth. These names serve as markers of temporal identity, connecting individuals to broader cultural and societal rhythms. Names such as “Teni” for Monday, “Tala” or “Talatu”

for Tuesday born; “Naruba” or “Laruba” for Wednesday born; “Lami” for Thursday born; “Juma” for Friday born; “Asabe” for Saturday born and “Ladi” for Sunday born underscore the importance of temporal factors in shaping naming conventions and cultural identity within the Gwandara community.

Names Given in the Course of a Child's Life

Gwandara names evolve over time, reflecting the changing circumstances, behaviors, and experiences of individuals as they journey through life. These names are not static but adapt to reflect personal growth, achievements, and challenges encountered along the way. Examples such as “Nnyaa” (imitation of baby cry) and “Azuma ze” (preferring idleness) illustrate how names can be acquired based on behaviors or habits, adding layers of complexity to the Gwandara naming system.

Findings and Discussion

From the above analysis, it is evident that naming system in Gwandara language provides a means through which the religious identity of the Gwandara community is known. From the kinds of names used by the Gwandara people and the religious connotation they depict, Gwandara communities, particularly within the scope of this study, are made up of Islam and Traditional Gwandara religions. This is because all the names analysed on the theme of religion justify this finding.

It is also seen that Gwandara names serve as custody where history and experiences are kept. The names remind parents of their ordeals and tell the society that some brave men existed in the past. They also reflect postures that sometime represent the true behaviour or picture of the bearer.

Conclusion

The investigation into the sociolinguistic factors and semantic implications of Gwandara names and naming systems reveals the intricate interplay between language, culture, and society. The findings underscore the significance of names as more than mere labels, but as reflections of socio-cultural values, beliefs, and experiences. As the Gwandara community navigates modernization and religious influences, there is a need to preserve and document traditional naming practices to maintain cultural identity and heritage. Additionally, further research in this area could explore the evolving trends in naming practices and their implications for language preservation and identity formation. Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of the complex interconnections between language, culture, and identity in the Gwandara community.

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