

## **Basà Anthroponomastics: A Linguistic Study of Basa Death Prevention Names: Wishes and Lamentation**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates personal naming practice as a strategy for preventing death among the Basà people of North-Central Nigeria, from the socio-cultural perspective, that is, it seeks to identify and analyze certain names and naming pattern as a way of preventing infant mortality. In this language, death prevention names can generate and maintain some level of assurance and security that is vital for the survival of a child given the belief that certain spiritual forces are responsible for incessant child mortality. These names are believed to link the bearer with their past, ancestors and deities. The qualitative approach was used with the study population as well as introspection to elicit the primary data supplemented by school registers in the study area. The secondary data were obtained via the onomastic literature. Different factors are responsible for the bestowal of the first name, but this study focuses only on those influenced by death, particularly, those used to appeal to ancestors, deities and used to taunt or dare death as a way of lamenting the death of their children and also expressing wishes. The study discovered that personal naming among the Basà people goes beyond mere personal labels

to telling stories that index various social and psychological factors and circumstances surrounding the family and the birth of the name bearer. Sometimes, these names serve as appellations and a means of communication to the interpellated who are usually ancestors or deities.

**Keywords:** Anthroponym, Basà, death, ethno-pragmatic, morphological processes, personal names and onomastics

### **Introduction**

Basà language is spoken in different locations in North-Central Nigeria such as, the six area councils of the Federal Capital Territory; Kokona, Nasarawa, Toto and Doma Local Government Councils of Nasarawa State; Bassa, Dekina, Ankpa and Kotonkarfe Local Government Areas of Kogi State; Kontagora Local Government of Niger State; Agatu and Markurdi Local Government Areas of Benue State. Some of these locations are characterized by different dialectal variants, each is identified by its name, but all varieties are mutually intelligible. Basà language is classified as belonging to Western-Kainji of Kainji language family, also referred to as Rubasa (Basa Benue) (Crozier and Blench, 1992:32).

Linguistic onomastics is a sub field of onomastics that studies proper names, especially, personal names also called anthroponyms, place names referred to as toponyms and animal names technically called zoonyms. Naming practice, though universal or cross-cultural among human societies, is remarkably idiosyncratic in style, custom etc. This work focuses on death prevention names as attested in Basà ethnic group. Death prevention names are bestowed on children who suffer cycles of child mortality and rebirth in the family. To forestall this unacceptable happening, the people have strategized how to overcome it by bestowing weird or strange names on children that

are portrayed as very unusual. These names are believed to protect the name bearers from the spirit of death, other underworld forces and forestall further death, which are believed to control the spirit of the affected infants and their right to live. This subtle strategy is a sociocultural method of daring or appealing to the spiritual or underworld forces to free the affected children from the cycle of death and reincarnation and allow them live. Though this approach is quite common among Africans, it portrays an idiosyncratic strategy among the Basà sociocultural practice in combating child mortality. The focus of this study is not just the ethno-pragmatic implication of these names but their grammatical structures.

### Research Questions

This research intends to answer the following questions:

- i. How are death prevention names structured in Basà?
- ii. Do these names differ in structure from other personal names?

### Literature Review

Names exist as part of the socio-cultural setting of every society. Being part of the society that gives them, they act as a window through which the world is understood and appreciated (Mutunda, 2014). They are used as conduits of information, especially, on society's attitudes or observation towards the named (Mapara et al, 2009:9). Musonda, Ngalande & Simwinga (2019) state that it is important that one has a good knowledge of the imagery and metaphor of the language under consideration to appreciate their names.

Studies on personal names have been carried out in the onomastic literature in different disciplines such as linguistics: Akinaso (1980), Ubahakwe (1981), Uduoyoye (1982), Essien (1986), Aceto (2002), Agyekum (2006), Mensah (2013), (2015),

and (2017) Mensah & Ishima (2020); Psychology: Steele (1988), Steele & Smithwick (1989); Anthropology Bean 1990, Obeng (1998), Ukpong (2007); Sociology: Ngade (2011), Suzman (1994), Author (2016) etc. Study on personal names is very pivot to the socio-cultural fibre of every society as there is no known society in the world which does not give names to every new born child. The foregoing fact justifies the academic interest cultivated by researchers to study personal names as they are not just indices of identification rather, underlain by different forms of communication.

Anderson (2004:435) presents a syntactic and morphological comparison of French, English and Greek names where he proposes the universality of names belonging to the category of determinatives such as pronouns and determiners but are inherently neither definite nor indefinite whose functions differ from regular argument of the predicator. Conclusively, he argues that each language varies. His argument reveals that the grammatical structure of personal names usually synchronizes with the grammar of the language. Mensah and Ishima (2020) argue otherwise that this may not always be true for all languages. They proof this with contemporary German names where Plank (2011:269) shows that family names in this language have "subtle but comprehensively severed ties with their ancestral word classes in their morphology upon attaining name status in spite of their origin in nouns and adjectives and in spite of retaining the phonology and syntax of their origin". He (Plank) further argues that this manifests in inflection and derivation and thus, renders the traditional word class categorization of family names as a type of noun in languages, especially languages like German which can affect both the lexicon and grammar. In virtually all African naming systems, names have meaning based on their semantic and pragmatic contents. This assertion is contrary to researchers like Searle (1958), Dixon and Lyons (1977) whose opinion is that

personal names do not have sense or meaning but what they only represent is unique and individuating.

Mensah & Ishima (2020) argue that in the African context, little attention has been paid to the grammatical description of personal names. They reported that (Nwangi, 2015:259) undertook a linguistic study of Kikuyu grammar and observes that the coding of information into names is basically characterized by lexical, syntactic and pragmatic roles of the language. He demonstrates in his investigation that Kikuyu grammar is largely contained in its personal names. His investigation was based on certain morphosyntactic phenomena like compounding, affixation and reflexivization which show how the feminine names in the language are grammaticalized. This plausible fact reveals that names are words that are attested in the lexicon which have semantic structure and exhibit morphosyntactic characteristics of lexical items; thus, constitute abstract properties of grammar (Mensah & Ishima, 2020).

Hussein (1997:25) submits that personal names are ambiguous properties of every linguistic community given that names are words (with expression character) that exist in a language which are an essential part of the linguistic repertoire of their bearers, users and givers and are valuable carriers of identity that reflect the dominant attitude and socio-cultural value of a community. Names are founded on people's cultural heritage, and therefore reflect major currents in their history and worldview. For this reason, they show deep attachment to indigenous traditions and embed significant psychological and pragmatic attributes. It is also believed that names in Africa have deep spiritual context and cosmology (Obeng, 1988; Mensah, 2015). Mapara, 2013:15) opines that personal naming in Shona culture practice is seen as a rite of passage marking the transition from the womb into the community. This opinion is supported by the claim of Mensah and

Ishima which says that personal naming practices, especially in Africa, "act as narrative discourses where stories that provide insights to live experience are told" (2020:4). Haviland et al define it "as a social transition from a state of nature to a state of culture" (2013:130).

In Basà naming tradition, personal names are given based on certain social and cultural parameters which require reflecting the situation or circumstances surrounding the conception and birth of the child, the situation surrounding the parents, family, community etc. Imoh, 2019 studies the structure of Basà personal names, where he outlines the various structure of Basà personal names, namely; words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Imoh Amende and Dansabo (2021) study the ethno-pragmatics of Basà personal names, where they did a general investigation into the language and socio-culture of Basà naming practices; Imoh and Dansabo (2020) examined Basà sentential names, focusing on those names that are composed in sentences and undergo complex morphological and morphosyntactic operations to derive their surface forms; Imoh (2020) surveys onomastics and names as indirect communication in Basà, where he studies anthroponyms, toponyms and zoonyms as a strategy of indirect communication in Basà language. This work differs from the former in that, it seeks to dwell mainly on the ethno-pragmatics of death prevention names by lamenting infant mortality and expressing wishes and prayer which are targeted at forestalling further infant mortality.

In the onomastic literature of African naming practices, especially the aspect of grammatical description, there are a number of related studies in linguistic onomastics such as Mensah & Ishima (2020) who investigate sentential names in Tiv and categorized Tiv names into several categories of sentences, examining the semantic, pragmatic, social and spiritual meanings. Their investigation shows a reflection of grammatical structure of

Tiv language. Mande (2009) discovered that in Tshivenda, names have referential and cultural meanings composed from nouns, verbs, adjectives and larger units like phrases, compounds and relativization. He claims that in this language, naming forms an indispensable part of grammar. Linguistically, Mapara argues that names are part of language and constitute phrasal, clausal and sentential categories. He further argues that, they may be semantically characterized in complete statements, questions, or commands which are appropriately situated in the realm of language study. Jauro, Ngamsa & Wappa (2013) undertook a structural study where they categorized names into their morpho-semantic attributes namely; word, classes and studied their semantic and pragmatic meanings.

Linguistic onomastics of personal naming practice reveals that these names can be coded in different linguistic categories such as lexemes, phrases, clauses and sentences of various types and functions. These possibilities have not been explored extensively to explicate the various grammatical structures, especially, in the Nigerian situation which is productive in this wise. Hence, this study aims at exploring to fill the existing gap on the grammar of Basà names, especially, those that are ethno-pragmatic in nature as a way of contributing to the linguistic onomastic or the onomastic literature in general.

Concerning meaning of names, Oluwale (2005:9) argues that “in Africa, there is so much meaning in a name. If you are given the right name, you start off with certain indefinable but very real advantages”. This supports the assertion of Mbiti (1975:213) that says, naming in Africa is a big social event being that, it is characterized by numerous roles.

Personal names in Bantu, according to Moyo (1996), especially the Ngoni-Tumbuka ethnic group in Malawi, prefer names with historical undertone such as *Mopara* (wilderness, named after several deaths of infants) and *Tafwachi* (what is wrong with us). They are based on the family or society's

antecedents.

Koopman (1990) undertook a study on the Zulu society, reached a conclusion that name givers and bearers are aware of the names, that the ability to read between the lines depends on the cultural continuity in which language is embedded which is not applicable or known to all. It is argued, therefore that pragmatics comes into play complimented by semantics.

Epstein and Kole (1998:26) maintain that “every utterance occurs in a culturally determined context of situation”. Hence, the meaning of a name can only be understood by the knowledge of the context in which naming is based. It is therefore important as the meanings of names are based on “complex social negotiations, learned and interpreted through socialization.” Thus, this implies that only those who are members of the society and participate fully in its activities can construe the deep meaning embedded in the names and such communicative interactions (Battie, 1957:37).

Finnegan (1976:173), considering names whose meanings are not deciphered from their surface suggests that “the colourful, often figurative quality of many of these names should be brought out. There are, of course, many names which are relatively straightforward with little overt meaning. Others, however, are richly allusive” in deciphering their meaning adequately.

Musonda, Ngalande & Simwinga (2019) maintain that one should have adequate knowledge of the language's imagery and metaphor to fully appreciate the aspect of naming. Matunda (2011) asserts that a name is like a document where one can read the history, culture and heritage of the individual or of the family in time and space. This view is related to the current investigation as it is used to unveil the bearer's cultural identity, the family's wish and prayer. He further says that in addition to psychological role in establishing a person's identity, names convey to those who know their origin and meaning the social and cultural experiences of the people who created them. These names, in addition, show how members of the community regard themselves because they

reflect values, tradition and events. A similar assertion to that is what Mashuri et al (2013) made saying that naming in African societies always reflects sociocultural and ideological realities of the societies that give or bear them. This, according to Musonda, Ngalande and Simwinda, shows how sociocultural factors play a major role in the selection and bestowal of names.

### Research Methodology

#### Data Generation/Elicitation and Research Participants

The study was conducted using the qualitative research approach and employed a descriptive linguistics framework/survey. The primary source of data elicitation included oral interview, partial integration, observation, metalinguistic interaction and focus group discussion with the sample population. The data elicited were verified by the researcher, given his native intuitions of Basà language. All the recordings were done during the interviews and were jotted down in a note book for easy identification. In some instances, the data were gathered through discussions and these discussions aided the researcher to verify the authenticity of the data gathered. These procedures were also supplemented by introspection, based on the fact that the researcher is a native speaker. The field work was carried out in Basà speaking areas of Kogi, Nasarawa states and Federal Capital Territory, North-Central Nigeria. The data were analyzed in four tiers, namely, the raw data presentation follow by the Leipzig Glossing Rules then the semantic meaning and finally, the pragmatic meaning (where applicable).

Selection of informants was done randomly considering the fact that the consultants are native speakers with native intuitions, who were between twenty (20) to seventy-five (75) years of age and their willingness to participate in the investigation. These randomly selected informants were both literate and non-literate native speakers of Basà language. The

selection was also based on their experience of good knowledge of Basà naming convention and also vast knowledge of culture, both as name givers and bearers/users.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

Death prevention names can be studied from the morphological, morphosyntactic and syntactic perspective. These names, like other categories of Basà anthroponomastics range from the simple lexemes to complex sentences which provide a window to the Basà grammatical structure. At the structural level, this category of names does not have any contrastive properties that distinguish them from other names. They only differ in terms of the content of their referents. This category of names at the lexical level are dominantly nouns, there are few adjectives and fewer idiophones. These names are characterized by some complex morphological processes to derived personal names such as nominalization, deadjectivization, conversion and adjectivization of verbs. In what follows, simple words are presented and analyzed.

**Table 1: Nouns names (simple words)**

	<b>Underlying noun</b>	<b>Derived noun</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
i.	ùdukwo	Dukwo	market
ii.	tù'wo	Tù'wó	death
iii.	ùdàkwò	Dàkwò	ant hill
iv.	òdáje	Dáje	instrument for siting a grave site
v.	cènje	Cènje	land
vi.	ùtwotwo	Twotwo	gravel
vii.	àgàzama	Gàzama	herbaceous
viii.	àwara	Wara	giant grass

The data in table 1 are noun stems which undergo the process of elision of the initial sound of the basic word or syllable to derive

personal names. This process applies to the derivation of proper noun for every noun that begins with a vowel. This is because, Basà personal names rarely begin with a vowel sound; hence, those that begin with an initial consonant sound are not affected by this rule (process). For instance, see data Table 1 (ii) & (v) where *Cènje* maintains its basic form because it begins with a voiceless affricate sound (/tʃ/). In (ii) the rule of elision does not apply, but in the derived word, the tone of second syllable is modified from its basic mid tone to high in the derived proper noun. In (v), *Cènjemaintains* its inherent form without any morphological or phonological process or adjustment.

In the field work embarked on to elicit data for this study, few names composed of verbs were found. There were two categories of this type namely; those that make command and those that are inflected. Those that make command, although could be regarded as imperative sentences are composed of just one or more verb in their present infinitive form and those that are inflected verbs are formed based on the appropriate method of inflecting such verb stems. The category of single verbs as names can be furnished with the examples in table 2. The other category will be discussed in table 12.

**Table 2: Verb names**

	<b>Underlying verbs</b>	<b>Derived noun</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
i.	gúré	Gûre	returned
ii.	námá	Námá	stay
iii.	fwósò	Fwósò	get rotten
iv.	nwóma	Nwóma-ne	misfortune
vi.	misfortune	misfortune-APPL	

In Tab. 2 i, the verb base of the derived name *Gûre* whose both syllables are characterized by [HH] tones are modified in the derived names with falling tone in the initial syllable and a mid

tone in the last or second syllable. The implication of the name is, 'the deceased child has returned/reincarnated'. The given name is a wish to prevent another cycle of death and rebirth.

The people believe in reincarnation that the deceased child is the same that returns by the process of rebirth or reincarnation. This, they prove by incising the body of a deceased child on a particular part before burial and mysteriously, in the next rebirth, the child is born with a mark on the position the deceased child was incised. This incision is also another mysterious strategy of forestalling further child mortality. *Námá* and *Fwósò* maintain their basic form as present infinitive. Meaning wise, *Námá* means 'stay', it appeals to the spirit of death to the spare named child. *Fwósò* means 'get rotten'. It dares the spirit of death by telling it, through the named child that they killed the child as usual and get it rotten. Its implication is a strategy to ensure the survival of the named child. Pragmatically, the name giver(s) present their wish through the name, the reverse way.

The verb in (iv) is derived from a basic verb *nwóma* which means 'misfortune'. The derived verb is suffixed with a suffix *-ne* which is an applicative marker whose additional meaning is, 'misfortune' for either the name bearer or the name givers inclusive. The meaning derives from the misfortune, particularly, infant mortality which the family has suffered. The name bestowed on the child is an expression of lamentation, fear and prayer to their ancestors or deities to show mercy on the named child and subsequent ones and spare them.

The next category of names is those composed in adjectives. Majority of this category of names are derived from verbs by certain morphological processes. This category, like the verbal category is not as productive as the nominal category, it was very difficult eliciting this category during the field work. This can be

presented in table 3 below.

**Table 3 names as adjectives**

	Underlying verbs	Derived Noun	Meaning
i.	fwósò	Fwéshí	rotten
ii.	shíngò	shinji	fed up

*Fwéshí* is derived from the verb stem *fwósò*, that is, it is a process of adjectivization where the adjective name *Fwéshí* is derived from a verb base *fwósò*. The meaning of the derived name is related to meaning of the underlying verb. The morphological behavior of table 3i is characterized by internal modification, the vowel of the first syllable (i.e. back high vowel) is replaced by high-mid front vowel, the consonant of the second syllable, i.e., alveolar fricative is replaced by a palate-alveolar (post-alveolar) fricative and the vowel of the second syllable, (back low vowel) is replaced with front high vowel. The socio-cultural meaning of *Fwéshí* is, 'the child will die and get rotten like other infants' (who preceded to her). It is noteworthy that the modification in the first syllable is a progressive assimilation because it is engendered by post-alveolar fricative following the high-mid tone. The name is a lamentable appeal to the deities to forestall further infant mortality.

*Shinji* in (ii) derives from the verb *shíngò* 'fed up' which expresses the lamentable frustration of the name giver(s) over the frequent child mortality. The morphological processes underlying its derivation are, the tones of the two syllables are modified, where the HL tones of the basic verb are replaced by MM tones and the velar stop is replaced by the voiced affricate.

During the field work, few data were elicited where nouns were derived from verbs by various morphological processes. Table 4 below presents data for this category.

**Table 4: Nominalization**

	Underlying verb	Gloss	Derived name
<b>Gloss</b>			
i.	nyíngátàngà	'console'	À n y ì n g à t ò.
		consolation	
ii.	Lásò	win	T ò .l a s ò
		victory	
iii.	nwóma	misfortune	T ò .n w ò .m à
		misfortune	

The morphological processes deriving the names in table 4 are: In (i) *nyíngátàngà* 'console' the basic verb, which derives *Ànyìngàtò* 'consolation'. The derived noun is derived by prefixing the verb stem with *a-* and eliding the last syllable *-gá*. In (ii), *Tòlasò* is derived by affixing the verb stem with the nominalizing prefix *-tó* and modifying the tones of the basic verb from [LL] to [MM]. In (iii), the name is derived by affixing the verb stem with a productive nominalizing prefix *-tó* and modification of the basic tones from high low to low low. Socioculturally, *Anyìngàtò* means 'consolation' that is, trusting God that the named child will survive. *Tòlasò* in (ii) is also an expression of faith or optimism that the named child will have victory over the spirit of death. (iii) is contrary to (i & ii) in that, in retrospect, it expresses a lamentation as a result of the death(s) of the earlier infants and assumes that the named child will bring more misfortune as it is expected to die.

The study also discovered a very few set of verb phrases headed by a negative verb stem to show lack of what is specified in the object position. This can be furnished in table (5).

**Table (5): Verb phrases as names**

i.	zá	utumwa → Zátumwa
	NEG.have	message
		'Has no message'

- ii.     zà     ùwè    ìbìye → Zàbìye  
           NEG.have thing     good  
           'Have nothing good'
- iii.    zà     ìlimwè → Zàlimwè  
           NEG.have usefulness  
           'Have no value'

The verb phrases in table (5) are all preceded by a negative verb, followed by a direct object of those object whose lack is expressed in each example, the initial vowel of the direct object is elided to derive the surface form. In (i), the surface meaning of *Zátumwa* is, the named child 'has no message', i.e. the child will not be useful for messaging as it may die like others. The name givers lament the uselessness of the named child. The initial vowel of the object of the compound *ìwèbìye* also elides deriving *Wèbìye*, which means, nothing good is expected from the name bearer. The name giver expresses their fear from their previous experience. (iii), *Zàlimwè* means, the named child has no value because it is a candidate of death. The name cautions whoever is rejoicing over the named child to be cautious and take a cue from the past experience. The names are lamentable expressions and prayers to deities to reverse the cycle of death and rebirth in the family.

At the sentential level, Basà death prevention names are very productive and demonstrate a number of structural types. In this language, sentential names are basically declarative, imperative, very few interrogative and riddles. This category of names is characterized by complex morphological processes to derive nouns from larger linguistic units. In what follows, the data for this category are presented and analyzed unveiling their structures and intricate morphological processes and meanings.

The structure of names in this category comprises subject verb and complement or object, which is the basic word order. They are the most productive source of names in the language. Examples:

**Table 6: Affirmative statements as names**

- i.     Bò     mâ     nyisa → Mânyísá  
        3SG   2SG   entice/deceive  
        'S/he is   enticing me'
- ii.    Ñ     ta     hânsà → Tâsà  
        1SG   PROG think  
        'I am still thinking'
- iii.   Bò     zhananè → Zhananè  
        3SG   go-HAB  
        'S/he will go again'
- iv.    Ñ     tà     'wanè  
        1SG   PROG hold  
        'I am still holding'

Examples in table (6) are statements of facts or truth. They give information to the listener. Anybody familiar with Basà socio-culture, upon hearing these names could infer what is responsible for their bestowal because, they summarize the story of the bearers and givers.

Structurally, the constituent of the name (i) includes the subject and predicate. The subject, the dominant noun phrase serves as the head of the sentence. The predicate is headed by the verb *nyísá* which subcategorizes the object *nâ* '1SG'. It implies, the named child is only enticing or deceiving the name givers as it is expected not to survive like others, that is why the habitual marking morpheme is attached to the verb stem.

Basà is basically SVO, as earlier stated but, where the patient is first person (singular or plural) the object occurs before the verb. In (ii), the verb is intransitive. The sentence is characterized thus: it is headed by a first person singular subject, followed by a progressive marker and the verb phrase made up of the verb only. The name giver, regardless of the arrival of the named child still ponders on the mishaps that have befallen him/her; a concern that threatens their faith about the survival of the named child. Data (iii) structure is headed by a third person singular pronoun and followed by a verb phrase composed in a complex verb stem: the verb *zhe* and the bound morpheme (suffix) *-nane* which is a habitual marker. Their ethno-pragmatic meanings are: (iii) Implies, the name bearer, based on their (name givers) established fact, will die. Their reactions through their expressions differ, still they have similar implications. (iv) is characterized by subject *Ń*, future marker (*tá*) and VP '*wane*, a sentence whose derived/surface form requires deleting the subject and compound the progressive marker and the verb phrase and it implies the name giver is keeping the infant pending when the ancestors decide what to do with it. It is a lamentable prayer to the ancestors, pleading for the survival of the named child.

The study also discovered a set of sentences that are negative statement as death prevention anthroponyms. These set of names are characterized by a negative operator to the affirmative which negativize the whole proposition. This category is furnished with examples in table 7 below.

Table 7. Names as negative statement

- i.      $\dot{N}$      láníshẹ → Láshe  
       1SG   worthy-NEG  
       'I am not worthy'

- ii.     $\dot{N}$      Jérishi → Jérishi  
       1SG   want-NEG  
       'I don't want'
- iii.    $\dot{N}$      zá     iyi     mẹ     hiẽn → Zêmẹhiẽn  
       1SG   NEG   thing to   say  
       'I don't have anything to say'

(7i) *Láshe* is structurally characterized thus, the subject *Ń* occurs before the VP which deletes in the derived form. The VP is made up of only the verb stem because it is intransitive. The verb is suffixed with a negative operator which negativizes the entire proposition. The implication is, it is a lamentation from the name givers' desperation as a result of their past experience (infant mortality), the name givers are not worthy of the blessing of the child. (ii) is structurally characterized thus, the sentence is headed by first person singular subject and followed by a verb phrase (which deletes in the surface form) which comprises the verb stem suffixed with a negative operator which implies, the name givers are fed up with the disappointments occasioned by incessant death and rebirth cycles and express their aggression and lamentation that they are no longer interested, death should carry the child as usual. (iii) Comprises the subject, a negative verb 'to have', an object and an independent clause. The derived form undergoes the derivative processes of clipping the subject, the negative operator subsists but its tone modified form High to falling tone, the direct object of the negative verb clips. The implication of the name is, the name giver(s) is speechless considering their past experience. One common thing in each of the cases in the foregoing data (i.e. 7) is that, the subject, in each case is (first person singular) nominative pronoun. For (i & ii), the name givers, out rightly reject the offer of the named child, whereas in (iii), there is a condition that is based on their antecedent; the name giver will only make their remark if the

named child survives.

### Names as command

This study uncovered death prevention names that are structured in imperative constructions. This category of names semantically functions as command or constitutes an order (Crystal, 2007). Typically, this sentence type has no overt subject and it is made up of the verb in the imperative mood and a direct object for transitive verbs or a complement. This category can be exemplified in table 8 below.

**Table 8 Names as imperative**

- |      |                        |    |      |       |              |
|------|------------------------|----|------|-------|--------------|
| i.   | Zhága                  | nà | ambè | →     | Zhánambè     |
|      | go.IMP                 | to | bush |       |              |
|      | 'Go to the bush/woods' |    |      |       |              |
| ii.  | Ñdá                    |    | mó   | 'wo   | →Ndómó'wo    |
|      | leave.1SG              |    | AGR  | die   |              |
|      | 'Leave me, let me die' |    |      |       |              |
| iii. | Gó                     |    | ì    | shilo | ba → Shilóba |
|      | let.3SG                |    | 3SG  | lay   | there        |
|      | 'Leave it there'       |    |      |       |              |

(8i) is characterized by clipping the second syllable of the verb base *zhága* and merges with the preposition and the object of the preposition. The initial sound of the complement elides and leaves its mid tone on the subsisting vowel of the preposition before they are compounded. Hence, the vowel of the preposition is characterized by rising tone. In (ii), the verb, the agreement marker and the verb stem compound to derive the surface form. (iii) is derived by clipping the initial verb and the third person impersonal pronoun and merge the second verb and the adverb of place *ba*. The meaning of (i) is a command to the named child commanding it to go to the woods where it is believed the spirit of

the dead reposes. This is born from the desperation of the cycles of death and rebirth the name givers suffered. The name in (ii) is also a lamentable expression and desperation by the name givers, speaking as if on behalf of the child that 's/he should be allowed to die'. (iii) *Shilóba* is a death prevention name given to a male child, command or advising the people concerned to be careful in making merry for the named child that it is better they watch and see if she will survive first than make merry and mourn him at last. This is also based on their past experience.

There is another subset of imperative names found in the course of the field work which make a negative command. Structurally, they are not different from the set in (8), but are preceded by a negative operator which in this case, is not an affix but an independent morpheme, but equally negativizes the whole proposition. This subset of imperative can be presented and analyzed in table 9 below.

**Table 9**

- |      |                     |         |       |   |         |
|------|---------------------|---------|-------|---|---------|
| i.   | Tà                  | mà      | hóngá | → | Tàhóngá |
|      | NEG                 | 2SG.OBJ | laugh |   |         |
|      | 'Don't laugh at me' |         |       |   |         |
| ii.  | Tà                  | ínà     |       | → | Tà'ínà  |
|      | NEG                 | lost    |       |   |         |
|      | 'Don't get lost'    |         |       |   |         |
| iii. | Tò                  | 'wó     |       | → | Tò'wo   |
|      | NEG                 | die     |       |   |         |
|      | 'Don't die'         |         |       |   |         |

Example (i) is derived by eliding the sentence object which occurs sentence medially and combining the negative operator and the verb stem. It is a command by the name giver to his/her interpellated or antagonists, instructing them to stop their

mockery as the name givers are hopeful of a better family future. (ii) is derived by a simple process of merging both lexemes, commanding the named child not to get lost (die) like other children who suffered infant mortality. (iii) is like (i) in its derivational process which is an instruction to the named bearer (male child) not to die. This instruction is born by the anticipation that the named child is likely to die like those born before it. Hence, the commands 'don't die'.

Another subcategory of names are those in question form but not conventional questions question like Wh-questions or polar questions but riddles. Riddles are questions that describe things or people in extremely difficult and confusing ways which are answered in clever and amusing manner, and are considered as a clever way of teaching. They usually require an answer as their meaning, followed by a deeper or pragmatic meaning (Imoh, 2009). They are also used as personal names and zoonyms (impersonal names) in the Basà language. These humorous puzzles are related to the meanings of these names by virtue of circumstances surrounding the birth of a child etc. The riddles themselves are not sentences but they trigger a response or an answer in a sentence form. Interrogative sentence type can be furnished with examples in (11) below.

**Table 11 Names as riddles**

- i. Riddle: Tègèri  
 Bùjwê           bò ọna       yèshe           ògú   ìbẹ-  
 ò  
 N.PRE-Inventor of city eat.-EG       inheritance  
 it-EMPH  
 'The founder of a city doesn't enjoy the inheritance of it'
- ii. Riddle: Mèjida  
 È    benenishi       tu'wo isẹbwẹ-o

3SG out-APPL- NEG death       anger-EMPH  
 'Getting offended with death is only futile'

This category of Basà names is quite productive but those that are death related are quite scanty. Only a few were found in this search.

Table (11 i) *Tègèri*, the founder of a city does not enjoy its inheritance. It is given to a male child and it means, the fact that a child is born does not guarantee its survival. This is given to a child whose birth is preceded by series of infant mortality. *Mèjida* in (ii) interpreted as 'Getting offended with death is only futile'. Death is so powerful that one cannot dare it in a fight or physical affront no matter how frustrated or hurt one may be, i.e. no matter the number of infant deaths recorded in the family, one is handicap as there is nothing they can do to combat death. The name is bestowed on a male child as a way of demonstrating the superiority of death in relation to human beings.

Another category of death prevention names in Basà are those composed in serial verb constructions. During the field work, very few of this category were elicited which were clearly serialization of verbs, where a name comprised two verbs in a simple sentence. They can be furnished with examples in table (12) below.

**Table 12 Names as serial verb construction**

- i. Nâ   ndá   zhaga → Ndâzhaga  
 2SG.IMP do   go.PROG  
 'Keep doing and going'
- ii. Úmâ   nyísá → Mânyísá  
 take   deceive/mock  
 'deception /mockery'

- iii. Ñdá mó 'wo → Ndámó'wo  
 leave.1SG let.AGR.o die  
 'Leave me, let me die'

Table (12 i) is derived by clipping the second person singular imperative marker and merging the serial verbs. It is a name bestowed on a male child to guarantee its survival after series of deaths and rebirths. The derived name comprises two verbs of equal grammatical value. This category of Basà names is quite productive but those that are death related are quite scanty. In this search, only few were found.

The derived names comprise two verbs each. (i) *Mányísá* implies, the addressee should do what they can within the little period available to the child before it goes (dies). (ii) is composed of two verbs *mâ* 'take' and *nyísá* 'mock/deceive' bestowed on a male child. It implies that the named child only came to mock and deceive the beneficiaries. (iii) is derived by merging all the lexical items to form a compound. *Ñdá* is a verb that means 'leave' (for first person singular), *mó* means 'let' and agrees with first person singular number and 'wo means 'die' The derived form is characterized by a reduced number of syllable as the subject *Ñdá* characterized by LH reduces to one syllable forming a consonant cluster i.e. *nd* where the first syllable *Ñ* loses its status as a tone bearing unit.

### Conclusion

This study investigates the phenomenon of the structure of death prevention personal names in the Basà language whose communicative tendency can deepen one's linguistic knowledge. This investigation shows that this category of names is characterized by important linguistic properties which can provide more empirical insights and facts into linguistic onomastics. It has attempted a systemic investigation of formal

grammatical information on the Basà naming practices which unveils the phonology, morphosyntax, semantics, and pragmatics and also stirs other aspects of information beyond the domains of linguistics (extra-linguistics) that underlie personal naming. The study has unearthed facts about the intricacies of sentential names in Basà such as simple sentence which derive names by complex phonological, morphological and morphophonological processes such as elision, clipping, replacement, modification, compounding, affixation, desententialization etc. that is, larger grammatical units such as clauses and sentences shrink into smaller grammatical units such as lexemes and compounds to derive personal names. In conclusion, this study aligns with (Chomsky, 1986) which argues that grammar constitutes a tacit knowledge of what the native speakers know about their language, a fact that is applicable to the grammar of names.

### Abbreviations

- APPL – Applicative  
 REFL – Reflexives  
 PST – Past  
 AGR-S – Subject agreement  
 AGR-O – Object agreement  
 IMP – Imperative  
 NEG – Negative/Negation  
 ISG – First Person Singular  
 FUT – Future  
 HAB – Habitual  
 PREP – Preposition  
 AUX – Auxiliary  
 PROG – Progressive  
 3SG – Third Person Singular  
 O (BJ) – Object  
 2SG – Second Person Singular  
 POSS – Possessive

3PL – Third Person Plural  
AGR – Agreement

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