Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Transmigration of Proper Names to Traditional Titles: A Stylistic-Onomastic Study

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Abstract
This study investigates the stylistic and onomastic phenomenon of the transmigration of proper names into traditional titles within Nigerian sociolinguistic contexts. Drawing on selected data from Yoruba socio-cultural milieu — *Apena, Oluwo, Balogun, Baṣọrun, Ọtun, Ọlọfin, Ọdọfin, Olu* (of Warri), *Ọba, Timi Agbale* (Timi of Ẹdẹ) — traditional Yoruba titles demonstrating how lexical items evolve from personal identifiers or localised appellations into markers of status, hierarchy and cultural legitimacy, the paper examines how lexical items originally functioning as personal names or descriptors evolve into institutionalised markers of authority. The study addresses the limited scholarly attention paid to the stylistic and functional processes through which proper names transmigrate into institutionalised traditional titles within Nigerian sociolinguistic contexts. Deploying a stylistic-functional approach, it explicates basic issues associated with transmigration, particularly semantic broadening, sociocultural reassignment and stylistic elevation, exploring processes such as semantic broadening, metaphorisation and pragmatic recontextualisation. The findings reveal that names in African societies are dynamic semiotic resources undergoing functional redistribution across contexts. The study concludes that the transmigration of names into titles reflects broader processes of meaning-making in language, where cultural values, hierarchy and identity are encoded and preserved through linguistic forms. The study recommends that scholars and curriculum developers should fully integrate onomastics into African linguistics and literary studies, given its relevance to cultural identity and language evolution. By integrating onomastic theory with functional linguistics and stylistics, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language operates as a dynamic system for encoding cultural meaning and social structure.
Keywords: Metaphorisation, Onomastic, Pragmatic recontextualisation, Semantic, broadening, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Transmigration

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Introduction

Naming is a fundamental linguistic and cultural practice through which societies construct identity, encode values and organise social relations. Onomastics, the study of names, extends beyond mere identification to encompass social meaning, cultural memory and ideological positioning. Within onomastic scholarship, names are not merely referential labels but semiotic resources embedded in sociocultural systems (Hough et al., 2020; Nicolaisen, 2015; Mensah et al., 2024). Names are central to human identity; but in many African societies, names transcend mere identification to function as repositories of history, authority and ideology (Odebode, 2012). In Nigeria, particularly, names are not static labels but dynamic linguistic resources capable of semantic expansion. Among Yoruba people in southwest Nigeria, names extend beyond personal identification to function as markers of status, authority, lineage and institutional roles (Ainiala & Östman, 2017; Dautey, 2025). A notable phenomenon within the Yoruba naming system is the transmigration of proper names into traditional titles, whereby lexical expressions or personal names evolve into institutionalised designations of rank and authority. The data used for the study, ten traditional Yoruba titles reflecting semantic institutionalisation, exemplify this process, reflecting shifts from descriptive or relational meanings to culturally embedded symbols of leadership and hierarchy.

In Yoruba socio-cultural context, the fluid boundary between proper names and traditional titles reflects a rich interplay between language and culture. This study examines the stylistic process through which proper names transmigrate into traditional titles, thereby acquiring institutional authority, symbolic weight and sociopolitical relevance. The study argues that this transformation is not merely lexical but deeply stylistic, shaped by sociopolitical contexts and cultural practices. While prior research has addressed name classification and etymology, limited attention has been given to the mechanisms underlying this shift, particularly from a stylistic and functional perspective. This study thus addresses that gap by adopting a stylistic-functional approach, drawing on stylistics' concern with foregrounding and meaning effects (Simpson, 2004) and systemic functional linguistics' perception of language as a social semiotic (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The study, further informed by recent socio-onomastic and functional linguistic research in African contexts (Mokhathi-Mbhele, 2023; Babatunde, 2025), aims to analyse the linguistic processes involved in the transmigration of proper names to titles; examine the role of sociocultural context in shaping name usage; and explore the stylistic and functional implications of these transformations. The study contributes to onomastic scholarship by demonstrating how naming practices intersect with discourse, politics and tradition.

Literature Review

The study of names, broadly known as onomastics, has attracted sustained scholarship across linguistics, anthropology and literary studies. Onomastics investigates names as linguistic and cultural entities that encode identity and meaning (Hough et al., 2020). Names function as semiotic signs that evoke associations and may undergo diachronic transformation (Anderson, 2007). Socio-onomastic perspectives stress the role of culture and social context in naming practices (Ainiala & Östman, 2017; Mensah et al., 2024; Dautey, 2025). Recent bibliometric studies show a growing interest in interdisciplinary and cross-cultural onomastic research, highlighting trends relevant to African naming systems (Li et al., 2024; Rejter, 2024). Onomastic studies assert that names are not merely labels but complex semiotic resources that encode cultural, historical and social meanings. The term *Aṣiwaju*, for instance, originally derived from a lexical structure meaning '*one who leads the front'* (that is

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

'leader'), evolves from a descriptive expression to a political title, reflecting semantic broadening and interpersonal elevation (Mensah et al., 2024). Its contemporary usage transcends traditional settings, functioning as a rhetorical marker of influence, exemplifying transmigration from descriptive expression to institutionalised title. From a Systemic Functional Linguistic perspective, *Aṣiwaju* undergoes interpersonal functional elevation, encoding prestige and leadership. Its use in discourse reflects pragmatic recontextualisation, as it is now deployed in political and honorific registers rather than literal contexts.

As Nicolaisen (2015) observes, names serve to label and categorise the world around us besides functioning as markers of identity and social positioning. This perspective is further reinforced by Anderson (2007) who argues that names operate within grammatical and semantic systems, often undergoing shifts in meaning and function over time. Onomastic studies have traditionally focused on the origin, structure and meaning of names. However, recent scholarship has drawn attention to the stylistic and sociolinguistic dimensions of naming (Ainiala & Östman, 2017; Algeo, 2010). In African contexts, names often function as discourse markers that encode status, lineage and ideology (Odebode, 2012). Stylistics, particularly functional stylistics, provides a useful framework for analysing how linguistic forms acquire meaning in context (Halliday, 1978).

This study integrates onomastics with stylistics to explore how names evolve into titles through discursive usage. A key concept relevant to the study is transmigration, understood as the movement of linguistic items across functional domains. In onomastic terms, this involves the transfer from lexicon to onomasticon, and from one name category to another, according to Nicolaisen (2015). Such shifts are evident in the transformation of personal or descriptive expressions into institutionalised titles, as seen in Yoruba sociopolitical structures. This process is closely linked to semantic broadening, whereby the original lexical meaning of a name eventually becomes extended or diffused. As Anderson (2007) notes, names often develop opacity over time, gradually losing their literal meanings while acquiring broader associative significance.

Transmigration refers to the movement of linguistic items across functional domains, particularly from lexicon to onomasticon or across name categories (Nicolaisen, 2015; Glogarová et al., 2025). This process is closely linked to semantic broadening and opacity, whereby original meanings become less transparent over time (Anderson, 2007). Transmigration in the context of this study denotes the semantic and functional shift of a proper name from an individual referent to a generalised, often institutionalised, title. This study examines the features of transmigration, viz.: semantic broadening, sociocultural reassignment and stylistic elevation. Semantic broadening highlights how a name loses its exclusive attachment to a single individual; sociocultural reassignment studies how the name becomes embedded in traditional or political structures, while stylistic elevation examines how the term acquires honorific and rhetorical force. This transformation, with onomastic shift, is both linguistic and cultural, reflecting shifts in power, identity and collective memory. In sum, the transmigration of proper names into traditional titles is a multidimensional phenomenon involving semantic expansion, metaphorical reinterpretation, sociocultural reassignment and functional recontextualisation.

Closely related is the process of metaphorisation, in which names evolve into symbolic representations of status, power or social roles. Metaphorisation, reflecting stylistic elevation, enables names to acquire symbolic meanings through conceptual mapping (Lakoff &

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Johnson, 1980). In onomastics, such mappings elevate names stylistically, allowing them to function as markers of prestige and authority (Hough et al., 2020; Mensah et al., 2024). Hough et al. (2020) stress that names function as semiotic signs capable of suggesting associations, thereby enabling metaphorical reinterpretation. In this sense, a name such as Balogun or Baṣọrun transcends its original referential function to embody leadership, authority or communal prestige. This transformation aligns with the notion of stylistic elevation, where linguistic forms acquire heightened rhetorical or aesthetic value within discourse.

The sociocultural dimension of naming is captured within the framework of socio-onomastics, which examines the interplay between names and social context. Scholars in this tradition argue that name usage is shaped by socio-cultural and situational circumstances (Ainiala & Östman, 2017). This insight is crucial for understanding sociocultural reassignment, a process whereby names are reinterpreted and institutionalized as titles within specific cultural systems. In Yoruba society, for instance, titles such as *Oluwo*, *Ọdọfin* and *Olu* (of Warri) reflect not only hierarchical structures but also deeply embedded cultural values.

There is a historical relationship between Warri — a major city in Delta State, South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, the native territory of the Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ijaw ethnic groups — and Yorubaland in the Southwest of the country. The relationship is deeply rooted in traditions of migration, political affiliation, linguistic affinity and sustained cultural exchange. Central to this connection is the widely recognised Itsekiri origin narrative, which traces the founding of the Warri monarchy to a prince from Ile-Ife — often identified as Ginuwa — thereby establishing a dynastic and symbolic link with the Yoruba cradle (Ile Ife). This connection is further reflected in the institutional structure of the Olu of Warri kingship, whose court hierarchy, ritual practices and coronation procedures exhibit notable parallels with classical Yoruba monarchical systems, particularly that of the Ooni of Ife. Linguistically, Itsekiri belongs to the Yoruboid subgroup, demonstrating considerable lexical and structural correspondence with Yoruba, while culturally, its shared religious concepts, chieftaincy institutions and social practices underscore a history of interaction and mutual influence. These affinities were historically reinforced through trade networks and diplomatic contacts linking the Niger Delta with the Yoruba hinterland. These elements substantiate the view that the Warri–Yoruba relationship represents a complex pattern of historical continuity and cultural convergence (Agbaje-Williams, 2005; Awolalu, 1979; Kaplan, 1977; Obayemi, 1976; Talbot, 1926).

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach, which views language as a system of meaning-making resources organised into ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Within this framework, Ideational function explains how titles represent social roles; Interpersonal function highlights their role in expressing power and hierarchy; while Textual function accounts for their stylistic deployment in discourse. When integrated with stylistics, this framework enables multidimensional analysis of how names function semantically, socially and rhetorically (Simpson, 2004; Istiqomah & Abdurrahman, 2025; Babatunde, 2025). From a functional linguistic perspective, Systemic Functional Linguistics provides a robust theoretical framework for analysing these transformations. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) conceptualise language as a social semiotic system in which meaning is realised through

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context-dependent choices. Within this framework, the shift from personal name to title can be interpreted as a functional reconfiguration, where linguistic forms are repurposed to serve new interpersonal and ideational meanings. This functional orientation complements insights from stylistics, particularly in its concern with how linguistic choices create meaning and effect. Literary onomastics, a subfield of stylistics, examines how names function as devices reflecting thematic relevance (Hough et al., 2020). When combined, these perspectives yield a stylistic-functional approach, which views names as dynamic resources that operate simultaneously at semantic, pragmatic and aesthetic levels. By integrating insights from onomastics, stylistics and systemic functional linguistics, this study adopts a stylistic-functional framework to account for the dynamic evolution of names within Yoruba traditional systems.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative descriptive design grounded in theory-driven analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), focusing on the functional and stylistic analysis of selected Yoruba names that have evolved into traditional titles. The approach is interpretive, drawing on theoretical frameworks from Onomastics and Systemic Functional Linguistics. The data comprise purposively selected traditional titles which originate from the Yoruba socio-political system: *Apena, Oluwo, Balogun, Baṣọrun, Ọtun, Ọlọfin, Ọdọfin, Olu* (of Warri), *Ọba, Timi Agbale* (Timi of Ẹdẹ). These were selected based on their historical and cultural relevance; evidence of lexical origin; and their established use as institutional or honorific titles. The items were analysed for their semantic, stylistic and sociocultural features with attention given to their evolution from proper names or descriptors to institutional titles.

Analytical Framework

The study integrates onomastics (Hough et al., 2020; Mensah et al., 2024), SFL (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Babatunde, 2025), and stylistics (Simpson, 2004; Istiqomah & Abdurrahman, 2025). Analytical Procedure: Identification of lexical origin; Analysis of semantic shift (broadening, opacity, metaphorisation); Examination of functional reassignment; Evaluation of pragmatic context; Interpretation of stylistic elevation.

Data Analysis

The analysis reveals consistent patterns of transmigration of proper names to traditional titles in Yoruba culture, that is, transformation from lexical expressions to institutionalised titles. This is demonstrated by the illustrative sentences showing how each traditional title/name moves from a literal or action-based meaning to a symbolic social identity or institutional role. Here, insights from Onomastics, Systemic Functional Linguistics and stylistics are applied to examine how the selected Yoruba names undergo functional and semantic transformation into traditional titles reflecting semantic institutionalisation.

1. Apena

Apena historically refers to a custodian or intermediary, particularly within religious or cultic settings. The term is originally associated with ‘the caller,’ ‘announcer’ or spokesperson. Its evolution into a title demonstrates sociocultural reassignment, where a functional role becomes institutionalised.

Stylistically, the term acquires elevated register value, signaling authority within a restricted sociocultural domain. Its meaning is partially metaphorised, shifting from action-based description to symbolic identity, as illustrated thus: ‘When the chiefs fell silent, the Apena spoke for the entire council.’ Here, *Apena* no longer merely refers to the act of calling or announcing; it symbolises the recognised voice and diplomatic representative of authority.

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2. Oluwo

The term *Oluwo* — often associated with spiritual leadership — illustrates semantic specialisation alongside broadening. While originally tied to priestly functions, literally denoting "owner/master of divination" or chief Ifá priest, it now operates as a generalised marker of religious authority, as illustrated thus: 'Before any major decision was taken in the kingdom, the Oluwo was consulted.' Here, the meaning shifts from one who performs divination to a symbolic custodian of spiritual wisdom and sacred tradition.

Within SFL, this reflects a shift in the ideational metafunction, where experiential meaning — priesthood — is reconfigured into a broader classificatory role. The title's continued use demonstrates context-sensitive reinterpretation.

3. Balogun

Derived from a compound meaning *'war leader'*, *Balogun* undergoes semantic broadening from military leadership to general chieftaincy status. The shift from 'war leader' to a generalised chieftaincy title demonstrates metaphorisation and functional reassignment (Dautey, 2025).

Its transformation demonstrates Transmigration: lexical phrase → institutional title; and Metaphorisation: war leadership → socio-political authority.

Stylistically, *Balogun* carries strong connotative weight, evoking valour and hierarchy, as illustrated thus: 'Though no war threatened the town, the Balogun remained one of its most powerful chiefs.' The title moves beyond physical warfare to signify military prestige, political influence and aristocratic authority.

4. Baṣọrun

Baṣọrun, historically the head of the principal kingmakers and powerful political regulators in the old Ọyọ Empire (a council of seven high chiefs) called Ọyọ *Mesi*, exemplifies institutional entrenchment (Law, 1977). The name becomes a fixed political designation with reduced semantic transparency, illustrating semantic opacity (Anderson, 2007; Li et al., 2024), where original meanings become less accessible. Functionally, it encodes high interpersonal authority within governance structures, as illustrated thus: 'The Baṣọrun's words could calm or unsettle the entire kingdom.' Rather than merely indicating a palace functionary, the title symbolises institutional power and constitutional balance within governance. Balogun and Baṣọrun originally denoted military and administrative roles but now function as symbolic representations of leadership and command. Their usage has shifted from specific office holders to broader symbolic representations of authority and command.

5. Ọtun

Meaning '*right-hand side'*, *Ọtun* exemplifies metaphorical extension from spatial orientation ('right-hand side') to hierarchical positioning (e.g. right-hand man), consistent with conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Rejter, 2024), as illustrated thus: 'As the Ọtun of the council, he sat beside the king during state deliberations.' This is a clear case of Metaphorisation (space → rank); Semantic broadening; and Functional reassignment. The spatial meaning ('right side') becomes metaphorised into rank, closeness to power, and seniority.

6. Ọlọfin

Ọlọfin (owner of authority/palace) reflects a possessive construction reinterpreted as sovereignty, indicating relational-to-institutional semantic shift (Glogarová et al., 2025). It demonstrates semantic elevation through ownership metaphor, as illustrated thus: 'The people looked to the Ọlọfin as the living symbol of communal continuity.' The prefix *Olo-* encodes possession, which is reinterpreted as sovereignty. The title shifts from possession of a palace to embodying sovereign legitimacy and sacred kingship.

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Within SFL, this reflects a shift in relational processes, where possession becomes authority. The title's meaning is thus ideologically loaded.

7. Ọdọfin

Ọdọfin represents a high-ranking administrative title, showing institutional specialisation. Its meaning is largely opaque to non-specialists, illustrating semantic fossilisation. Pragmatically, its use is restricted to formal and traditional contexts, reinforcing register specificity, as illustrated thus: 'No visitor entered the inner court without the approval of the Ọdọfin.' The title evolves from a functional court role into a marker of elite access, trust and royal intimacy. Olu (of Warri). *Olu* represents a striking case of stylistic elevation and semantic narrowing. Originally meaning *lord* or *owner*, it becomes a proper title designating kingship in a specific geopolitical context, as illustrated thus: 'The Olu united the people of Warri during the annual festival.' The title transcends the simple notion of ownership or leadership and becomes the symbolic embodiment of Itsekiri identity and monarchy. This reflects metaphorisation, where ownership is mapped onto sovereignty. The title's restricted usage illustrates pragmatic recontextualisation, as meaning becomes tied to a specific cultural institution. Olu (of Warri) retains geographical specificity, but its usage in discourse often foregrounds its prestige rather than its locality, thus enabling partial generalisation, thereby reflecting regional variations and cultural adaptation. The relationship between Warri and Yorubaland is historically grounded in migration, political contact, language and shared cultural institutions — especially among the Itsekiri people. The Warri monarchy — the Olu of Warri institution — shows clear Yoruba influence. As noted earlier, Itsekiri belongs to the Yoruboid subgroup, reflecting substantial lexical and structural correspondence with Yoruba.

8. Ọba

Ọba, like Olu, originally denoting a king, now operates both as a specific title and a generalised signifier of traditional rulership, demonstrating semantic stability alongside functional expansion. This is illustrated by the following sentence: 'To the people, the Ọba was not merely a ruler but the living face of tradition.' The term shifts from denoting one who rules to representing sacred ancestry, cultural continuity and communal identity.

9. Timi Agbale

'Timi' is the royal title of the king of Ẹdẹ, an ancient town in southwestern Nigeria — Timi of Ẹdẹ. It is similar to how 'Ọba' is used more generally in Yorubaland. Timi Agbale, a hunter and warlord, was instrumental in the founding of the town. 'Agbale' became an appellation or cognomen attached to the Timi stool, functioning as a distinguishing title or praise-name, as illustrated by the following expression: 'The name Timi Agbale inspired loyalty long before the king appeared in public.' The title becomes more than a description of leadership; it symbolises dynastic prestige, territorial authority, and historical memory in Ẹdẹ. In Yoruba onomastic practice, such titular extensions serve not merely as identifiers but as repositories of historical memory, encoding lineage, achievement and sociopolitical legitimacy. As Johnson (1921) and Biobaku (1973) noted, Yoruba royal titles often accumulate praise epithets that differentiate successive holders of the same office while reinforcing continuity within the institution of kingship. Thus, *Timi Agbale* exemplifies the transmigration of proper names into institutionalised traditional titles, underscoring the dynamic interplay between language, history and authority in Yoruba culture.

Cultural/Onomastic Significance: It reflects Yoruba naming traditions, where titles accumulate praise epithets over time. Such titles help distinguish rulers across generations.

In onomastics, it illustrates how proper names evolve into traditional titles (name transmigration).

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Timi Agbale demonstrates how compound titles encode historical narratives, with 'Agbale' functioning as an attributive extension that reinforces lineage and legitimacy — a reflection of regional variations and cultural adaptation.

Stylistic Features of Transmigration

1. Metaphorisation: Many titles function metaphorically, e.g. *Olu* as '*lord'* or '*owner'* beyond its literal sense; *Balogun* functions as a symbol of leadership in various domains.
2. Semantic Broadening: Names lose their exclusive reference and acquire generalised meanings.
3. Honorification: The transmigration process imbues names with reverential qualities, aligning them with authority and tradition.
4. Indexicality: These titles index social roles (hierarchy), ethnic identity and historical continuity.
5. Pragmatic Flexibility: In contemporary discourse, these titles are deployed strategically — to confer legitimacy, signal allegiance, or construct identity.

In sum, as shown by the illustrative sentences, the semantic movement is from literal action/function (calling, fighting, divining, sitting at the right-hand side, ruling) to institutionalised identity and social symbolism (authority, legitimacy, prestige, sacredness, political proximity, communal representation). This process illustrates how traditional titles undergo partial metaphorisation, becoming social signs that encode hierarchy, identity and cultural memory rather than merely describing actions.

Synthesis of Findings

Across the dataset, the transmigration of names into titles follows a consistent pattern:

1. Lexical Origin → descriptive or relational expression, e.g. Ọba, which originally denotes a king, now operates both as a specific title and a generalised signifier of traditional rulership.
2. Semantic Shift → broadening, metaphorisation or opacity, e.g. *Balogun* undergoes semantic broadening from military leadership to general chieftaincy status, demonstrating metaphorisation and functional reassignment (Dautey, 2025).
3. Functional Reassignment → encoding authority, hierarchy, identity, e.g. the evolution of Apena (spokesperson) into a title, showing sociocultural reassignment, where a functional role becomes institutionalised.
4. Pragmatic Fixation → restricted use within sociocultural contexts. For instance, titles such as Olu (of Warri) and Timi Agbale (of Ede) retain strong cultural specificity, thus reflecting localisation and identity marking.
5. Stylistic Elevation → increased rhetorical and symbolic value, e.g. *Ọlọfin* (Owner of authority/palace') reflects a possessive construction reinterpreted as sovereignty, indicating relational-to-institutional semantic shift, showing semantic elevation through ownership metaphor.

These transformations confirm that names in Yoruba society function as dynamic semiotic resources, aligning with Halliday's view of language as a meaning-making system.

Analytical Conclusion

The data demonstrate that the transmigration of proper names into traditional titles is not merely a lexical process but a multilayered linguistic phenomenon involving: Semantic restructuring; Metaphorical mapping; Sociocultural encoding; and Functional redistribution.

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

By integrating Onomastics, Stylistics and Systemic Functional Linguistics, this study establishes a stylistic-functional model for understanding the evolution of names into culturally embedded titles.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the transmigration of proper names into traditional Yoruba titles is a systematic and multi-layered linguistic process, rather than a purely historical development. This process can be best understood through the interaction of semantic, sociocultural and functional factors.

First, the data confirm that semantic broadening and opacity are central to the evolution of names into titles (Anderson, 2007; Li et al., 2024). Many of the examined items, such as *Balogun* and *Baṣọrun*, originate from transparent lexical constructions but gradually lose their compositional clarity. This aligns with Anderson's (2007) observation that names tend toward semantic opacity over time, allowing them to function as stable symbolic units rather than descriptive expressions. In this way, meaning shifts from literal reference to institutional significance. Second, metaphorisation plays a critical role in mapping concrete domains (space, possession, warfare) onto abstract sociopolitical hierarchies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Mensah et al., 2024). Several titles emerge through metaphorical mappings, such as spatial (*Ọtun* → right-hand authority) or possessive (*Ọlọfin* → owner → ruler). These transformations demonstrate how abstract social hierarchies are conceptualised through concrete linguistic forms. From a stylistic perspective, such metaphorical extensions contribute to stylistic elevation, as the names acquire rhetorical weight and cultural prestige.

Third, the study highlights the importance of sociocultural reassignment. Within the Yoruba context, names are deeply embedded in systems of governance, religion and lineage. Through repeated institutional use, certain names become fixed as titles, encoding specific roles within traditional structures. This supports the socio-onomastic view that naming practices are shaped by socio-cultural and situational contexts, reinforcing the idea that meaning is socially constructed and maintained.

From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics, these transformations can be interpreted as functional reconfigurations across metafunctions:

i. Ideational metafunction: Names shift from representing actions or attributes to encoding social roles. For instance, Ọtun ('right side') becomes metaphorised into rank, closeness to power and seniority.
ii. Interpersonal metafunction: Titles enact authority, hierarchy and respect. For instance, *Apena*, which originally denotes the act of calling or announcing now symbolises the recognised voice and diplomatic representative of authority.
iii. Textual metafunction: Their usage becomes contextually restricted and discourse-specific (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Babatunde, 2025). Ọlọfin, Ọdọfin and Ọtun, for instance, show internal differentiation within the chieftaincy system, yet their stylistic deployment in discourse often abstracts them into archetypes of governance.

This demonstrates that the evolution of names into titles is fundamentally a process of meaning redistribution, where linguistic resources are adapted to serve new communicative purposes.

Furthermore, the concept of pragmatic recontextualisation provides insight into how these titles function in contemporary usage. Pragmatic recontextualisation stabilises meaning within institutional contexts, enhancing the indexical power of titles (Nick, 2020; Mokhathi-Mbhele, 2023). The results support a stylistic-functional synthesis in which names operate

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ISSN:3121-7710

simultaneously as semantic, social, and stylistic resources. Once recontextualised, names such as *Balogun* or *Oluwo* operate within highly specific discourse domains — political, religious or traditional — where their meanings are stabilized and socially recognized. This restricted usage enhances their indexical power, allowing them to signal identity, authority and affiliation simultaneously. Significantly, the findings support a stylistic-functional synthesis, demonstrating that names are not only semantic units but also stylistic devices. Their elevation from ordinary lexical items to culturally significant titles reflects a process of foregrounding, where linguistic forms are imbued with heightened symbolic value.

The transmigration of proper names into traditional titles reflects the dynamic nature of language in African societies. It demonstrates how linguistic forms are shaped by cultural practices and sociopolitical realities. This phenomenon also highlights the role of discourse in redefining meaning. Titles are not static; they are continuously reinterpreted through usage. The interplay between tradition and modernity is particularly evident in political contexts, where titles are adapted for rhetorical purposes.

Northern and Eastern Equivalents in the Transmigration of Proper Names

Extending the analysis beyond Yoruba, titles such as *Shehu* and *Waziri* (of Adamawa State), alongside *Eze*, *Obi* and *Igwe* in Igbo sociopolitical contexts, further illustrate the transmigration of proper names into institutionalised titles across Nigerian cultures. In Northern Nigeria, *Shehu* — etymologically linked to the Arabic *shaykh* — and *Waziri* (vizier, minister, literally 'One who bears the burden of office') emerge from Islamic administrative traditions, where personal designations denoting scholarly or political authority undergo semantic expansion into formalised offices. As demonstrated in studies of the Sokoto Caliphate, such titles embody a dual layering of religious and political meaning, reflecting both spiritual leadership and bureaucratic function (Last, 1967; Levtzion, 1994).

In contrast, Igbo titles such as *Eze*, *Obi* and *Igwe*, as documented by Isichei (1976), originate as markers of kingship and community leadership within decentralised political structures. While these titles retain strong associations with traditional authority, their contemporary usage reveals a notable semantic broadening: they are increasingly deployed metaphorically in political rhetoric, social hierarchy and even popular discourse to denote influence, affluence or symbolic power. This shift parallels Yoruba onomastic processes, though with a comparatively stronger retention of their original regal referents. Across both Eastern and Northern contexts, these examples underscore a shared onomastic dynamic: the movement from individualised or descriptive origins to institutionalised and transpersonal signifiers of authority. Whether through Islamic bureaucratic consolidation or indigenous systems of kingship, the transmigration process entails semantic elevation, cultural fixation and eventual abstraction. Thus, titles such as *Obi, Igwe*, *Shehu* and *Waziri* — like *Timi Agbale* — demonstrate how names once tied to specific persons or attributes became enduring linguistic instruments for encoding power, identity and sociopolitical continuity within African societies.

For instance, Eze is originally associated with rulership, strength or supremacy, as illustrated by the following utterance: 'At the festival, the Eze did not merely preside; he embodied the unity of the people.' Here, *Eze* shifts from the simple sense of 'ruler' or 'king' to a symbolic representation of communal identity, ancestral continuity, and sacred authority. The title becomes relational and metaphorical, expressing guardianship and collective belonging rather than mere political control, as illustrated by the following: 'The villagers spoke of the Eze as the father of the land.' Obi originally denotes 'heart,' 'centre' or 'palace' or 'courtyard'. The

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
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social hierarchy of Obi is illustrated by the following text: 'Every dispute eventually found its way to the Obi for settlement.' This shows the term moving from denoting a physical centre or residence to symbolising the institutional seat of authority and justice.

The following text shows that *Obi* no longer refers simply to a structure or location but metaphorically encodes legitimacy, kinship and cultural cohesion: 'Though absent from the gathering, the Obi remained the spiritual centre of the community.' Igwe literally means 'sky' or 'heaven'; by extension, exalted ruler, as illustrated by the following text: 'The Igwe's blessings were received as though heaven itself had spoken.' Here, the meaning shifts from the physical sky (heaven) to a sacralised royal identity associated with transcendence and divine legitimacy. The following utterance illustrates how the title metaphorically expresses elevated status, supreme authority and symbolic distance from ordinary social conflict: 'To his people, the Igwe stood above factional interests.'

General Semantic Shift: In these titles (*Eze*, *Obi* and *Igwe*), the semantic movement is from literal meaning or concrete reference (king, centre/heart, sky/heaven) to symbolic socio-cultural identity (sacred rulership, communal authority, institutional legitimacy, paternal guardianship). Thus, the titles become metaphorised markers of social relations, hierarchy and cultural memory rather than merely descriptive terms.

Implications for Onomastic Studies

The transmigration of proper names into traditional titles underscores the fluidity of naming systems in African contexts. It reveals that:

i. Names are culturally negotiable rather than fixed.
ii. Linguistic forms can encode power structures.
iii. Stylistic usage plays a crucial role in redefining meaning over time.

Implications of the Study

This study has several important theoretical, methodological and practical implications.

The study contributes to theory by integrating onomastics, SFL, and stylistics; to methodology by demonstrating a multi-framework qualitative approach; and to practice by emphasising the cultural significance and preservation of naming systems (Mensah et al., 2024; Babatunde, 2025).

1. Theoretical Implications

The study advances scholarship in Onomastics by demonstrating that names are dynamic semiotic resources capable of undergoing systematic functional transformation. By integrating Stylistics with Systemic Functional Linguistics, the research provides a stylistic-functional model for analysing how names evolve into titles. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of naming as both a linguistic and sociocultural phenomenon.

2. Methodological Implications

The study shows the effectiveness of a qualitative, theory-driven analytical approach in examining naming practices. It demonstrates that combining semantic, pragmatic, and functional analyses yields deeper insights than single-theory approaches. This model can be adapted for similar studies across other languages and cultures.

3. Sociolinguistic and Cultural Implications

The findings highlight the role of naming in encoding power, hierarchy, and identity within Yoruba society. The transformation of names into titles reflects broader sociocultural processes, reinforcing the idea that language is central to the preservation and transmission of cultural values.

4. Stylistic and Literary Implications

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

The study underscores the importance of names as stylistic devices capable of carrying symbolic and rhetorical weight. This has implications for literary studies, particularly in African literature, where names often function as markers of characterization, ideology, and thematic depth.

5. Practical Implications

The research emphasises the need for:

i. Preservation of indigenous naming systems
ii. Inclusion of naming studies in educational curricula
iii. Greater awareness of the cultural significance of traditional titles

Such efforts can help preserve linguistic heritage in the face of globalisation and language shift.

Conclusion

This stylistic-onomastic study demonstrates that the boundary between proper names and titles is fluid and permeable. Through processes of semantic broadening, cultural reassignment and rhetorical elevation, names transcend their original referents to become enduring symbols of authority and identity. The transmigration of proper names into traditional Yoruba titles is a systematic linguistic and sociocultural process involving semantic, functional and pragmatic transformations. The study advances a stylistic-functional framework for understanding name transformation in African contexts (Li et al., 2024; Rejter, 2024). It is observed that names function as dynamic semiotic resources for encoding identity and authority.

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

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