



A structural analysis of personal names in Kusaal

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Highlights

- Personal names in Kusaal conform to almost all the structural rules of the language.
- They occupy designated positions in the noun phrase and the sentence.
- They are neutral to syntactic features such as definiteness and plurality.
- Personal names are often marked with the prefix a-.
- They can fall in different categories of compounds.

Abstract

New names are created on daily bases but old names never change in form. Thus, names offer a window where the archaic linguistics structure of a language can be traced. This study explores the grammatical structure of personal names in Kusaal by focusing on their phonology, morphonology and syntax. Phonologically, the paper explores the phonotactics of personal names; morphologically, it discusses the various morphemes that constitute this category of names, and syntactically, it analyses the rules that underlie the construction of personal names that are phrases, clauses and sentences. The meaning of personal names in Kusaal have been discussed extensively in previous studies for which reason minimal attention is dedicated to it in the current work. The findings show that personal names in Kusaal conform to almost all the structural rules of the language. They occupy specific positions in the noun phrase and in the sentence; they are neutral to syntactic features such as definiteness and plurality. Personal names also take prefixes and affixes and can be compound words. There are instances where insertions and deletions are observed in the compound formation of personal names in the language. The study uses the Basic Linguistics Theory for its descriptive analysis of personal names. Both primary and secondary data are used in this study.

Introduction

The study of names, especially personal names has gained considerable attention in the literature and recently, Kusaal and its sister languages have not been left out (Dakubu, 2000, Awedoba, 1996, Abubakari, 2020; Abubakari et al., 2023 among others). Previous studies on names in these languages have mainly focused on their sociolinguistic, and ethnolinguistic analyses. Numerous cross-linguistic studies reveal that personal names exhibit many linguistic features in relation to their syntax, semantics, morphology and phonology. For instance, some personal names are amenable to some phonological influences such as vowel elision, syllable truncation, consonant deletion and assimilation among others. Obeng (1998) suggests that Akan death-prevention personal names may be classified into simple and complex names. The simple names consist of either a root alone or a root with an affix or affixes. The complex names may be classified into phrases (usually possessive constructions), incomplete sentences and complete sentences. Agyekum (2006) states that certain phonological processes take place during Anglicisation of some Akan personal names while Adomako (2015, 2019) confirms that some personal names in Akan undergo some morphological operations including; compounding, truncation, and affixation (prefixation) as well as phonological processes such as elision, ATR harmony, V-raising, compensatory lengthening among others occur at the morpheme boundaries in casual speech context. Owu-Ewie (2014) additionally, presents a morpho-syntactic analysis of

some Fante habitation names. He observes that some compound names as well as names which are formed by reduplication undergo some phonological processes such as vowel elision and assimilation. For instance, he argues that the word *man* (town)+*kεse* (big)+*mu* (in) becomes *mankεsim* where the vowel /u/ ending the postposition is elided and that though, the vowel is elided, its ATR influence is still felt to assimilate the high vowel /e (ɪ)/ to become /i/. Similarly, Owu-Ewie et al. (2021) indicate that some personal names in Akan are formed by reduplication and when that happens some reduplicated names undergo some phonological processes such as elision, assimilation, vowel raising and vowel addition. For example, *Kyεkyεr* (a person who delays) is made up of *Kyεr* (to delay)+*Kyεr* (to delay) where there is deletion and vowel lengthening. They further explain that the liquid sound /r/ is deleted in the base form and compensated for with /ε/ and pointed to this phenomenon as compensatory lengthening (Owu-Ewie et al., 2021: 38). Their study also notes that at the morphological level, some Akan names are single stems, compounds, affixations, and reduplications, while at the syntactic level some names are by function, being declaratives, imperatives or interrogatives and structurally as simple, compound or complex. Quite a number of the studies grammar of personal names is traced to Akan compared to other languages in Ghana.

Caesar (2019) provides a morphosyntactic analysis of allusive names in Dangme. Morphologically, she points out that Dangme allusive names can take the form of mono-morphemic, di-morphemic and poly-morphemic. Syntactically, she reveals that allusive names in Dangme can take lexical, phrasal and sentential forms and function as declarative, imperative, interrogative clauses reduced to personal names and that at the phrasal level, noun phrases are the only forms that the allusive names take in Dangme. At the sentential level, simple and compound clauses were identified.

With respect to the literature on Mabia languages, Awedoba (1996) points out that Kasena personal names exhibit a varied structure and are amenable to several kinds of classifications. He argues that many personal names in Kasena are derived from nouns rather than verbs. For instance, names like *Agao*, *Anao*, *Kadoa*, *Kachana* etc. morphemically contain a prefix and a noun root (Awedoba 1996: 12–13). Moreover, Kasena personal names do not have gender affixes (Awedoba 1996). In addition, Awedoba notes that Kasena personal names do not contain suffixes, however, it is shown that some Kusaal personal names take suffixes. Syntactically, Kasena personal names exhibit forms that are derived from potential sentences such as regular statements, questions, commands or exclamations (Awedoba, 1996).

Although Kasena and Kusaal are sister Mabia languages, this study will show that Kusaal personal names differ in some structural ways compared to Kasena. Names in the former are formed from all lexical categories and also, though limited, mark gender using suffixes in some nouns. Sentential personal names are common in both languages.

Rahman (2013 as cited by Fatawu, 2020) argues that the most common phonological process in the formation of compounds in Dagbani personal names is elision and that it deals with the loss of a segment; a vowel, a consonant and sometimes a syllable. Similarly, it is confirmed in the work of Abdul-Mumin (2019) that some compound personal names in Dagbani undergo deletion as a way of avoiding consonant clusters from occurring. This corroborates with Kusaal where the formation of some compound personal names goes through phonological processes like deletion or vowel insertion for the purposes of fulfilling syllable structure requirement of the language. In Likpakpaam, personal names exhibit linguistic characteristics both morphologically and syntactically. Morphologically, Bisilki (2018) opines that a typical personal name can consist of a maximum of three morphemes. That is, a personal name contains only one root or free form, with or without other bound morphological segments. Syntactically, he observed that many of the Likpakpaam personal names are nominal phrases and clauses and in terms of functions, some names can be declarative, an interrogative, a command or even an exclamation. It is noted in Bisilki (2018) that some personal names in Likpakpaam succumb to some assimilatory processes like homorganic nasal assimilation. Kusaal personal names also exhibit similar linguistic features. Some Kusaal compound personal names are amenable to some phonological processes such as deletion and assimilation and also exhibit some morphological and syntactical features (Abubakari, 2020).

In Oromo, a language spoken in Ethiopia, personal names are derived from nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and verbs (Gerba, 2014). He notes that while a few Oromo personal names are neutral and can be given to both males and females, many are gender specific. It has been observed that the suffixes attached to these names serve as markers of gender. Names ending with suffixes like *-a*, *-aa*, *-an*, *-uu*, and *-saa* are typically associated with males, whereas names ending with suffixes such as *-tii*, *-tuu*, and *-ee* are more commonly given to females (Gerba, 2014; 258). Similarly, it is observed in Tamil of India that some personal names are also distinguished by gender specific suffixes such as *-an* for male and *-i* as in *Isvaran* and *Isvari* respectively (Britto, 1986; 251). Kusaal follows a similar pattern, however, unlike in Oromo, this analysis reveals that there are only a limited number of gender-specific suffixes used for personal names. Nevertheless, it's worth noting that in both Kusaal and the languages examined thus far, gender is not determined by the use of prefixes but suffixes.

In Yoruba, spoken in Nigeria, Akinnaso (1980) proposes that personal names are either derived from nominal forms or from complete sentences with varying levels of complexity. Names derived from nominals can take the forms of: (1) a single noun, for example, *Dàda* (child born with curly hair); (2) a compound, like *òkéowó* → *òké + owó* (bag+money); and (3) a verb phrase nominalization, as seen in *Àbíké* → *à bí ké* (one who is born to be petted) (Akinnaso, 1980; 288). On the other hand, names derived from sentences are marked for different moods: declarative, as seen in *Omóniyì* → *omó ní iyì* (child has prestige); interrogative, as in *Kíladéjo* → *kí ni adé jo* (What is crown like?); and imperative, as in *Dúrójayé* → *dúró je ayé* (stay and enjoy life), as explained in (Akinnaso, 1980; 294–295). This pattern of Yoruba personal name structure closely resembles the structure of personal names in Kusaal, as argued in this study.

The Turkish language employs various word-formation processes for creating personal names, with compounding being a commonly used method (Duman, 2004). It is interesting to note that many personal names in Turkish have been and continue to be formed through compounding using elements from Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Duman (2004; 163) highlights that Turkish personal names can be created by combining two nouns or an adjective and a noun from different languages, such as *Nuray* (combining Persian “nur,” meaning ‘radiance,’ and Turkish “ay,” meaning ‘moon’), *Songül* (combining Turkish “son,” meaning ‘last,’ and Persian “gül,” meaning ‘rose’), or *Nurşen* (combining Persian “nur,” meaning ‘radiance,’ and Arabic “şen,” meaning ‘cheerful’). It's worth noting that Arabic or Persian elements can take Turkish derivational suffixes, as seen in *Nurdan*, which means ‘made out of light’ (formed by combining Persian “nur” with the Turkish derivational suffix {-DAn}) as presented in Duman (2004; 163). While Kusaal has personal names borrowed from Arabic, Hausa, English, and Akan, no suffix morpheme is observed to be borrowed from another language into Kusaal. Borrowed names in Kusaal are rather adopted to suit the structure of Kusaal be it phonologically, morphologically and syntactically.

The main objectives of this study are to (i) analyse the internal syntactic structure of personal names in Kusaal, (ii) discuss the morphological properties of personal names in the language, and (iii) explore the various phonological processes available in personal names in Kusaal. In general, personal names in Kusaal are not arbitrary. The typology of these names shows that they are not randomly given to newborn babies but are rather informed by special events and circumstances surrounding the birth of the name bearers (Abubakari, 2020; Musah & Abubakari, (forthcoming); Abubakari et al., 2023). All the personal names discussed in this study include their meanings which express the cultural philosophies of the people and further strengthen previous arguments that names are not randomly assigned but influenced by circumstances including the belief system of the people among

others (Abubakari, 2020; Abubakari et al., 2023). The meanings of the names form a basis of their semantic analysis. To avoid redundancy, a separate section, therefore, will not be dedicated for the semantics of personal names in Kusaal in this work. This is because every aspect of the linguistics analysis: syntax, morphology and phonology give the meanings of the names with further explanations where necessary. These explanations clarify sources of some of the names and the reasons why some names are assigned as personal names.

The significance of this study cannot be overemphasised. Studies on the grammar of personal names in the Mabia languages of Ghana and West African has received very little attention if any at all. The literature, as can be seen shows research where authors focus on aspects of the structure of the grammar of personal names in some Ghanaian languages: syntax, morphology and phonology. This work serves as a pioneering attempt of an all-encompassing analysis of the grammar of personal names in a single study with data from one language, Kusaal. The research further adds to the growing body of knowledge on Ghanaian and by extension African anthroponym. It demonstrates how names can be used as a tool to study the grammar of a language and its potential in unraveling the linguistics competence of speakers of a given language. The study employs the Basic Linguistic Theory (Dixon 2010) to describe and discuss the grammar of personal names in Kusaal. The data forms part of the daily discourses of the speakers of the language.

The paper is organised as follows; section 1.1 discusses the methodology and data collection, 1.2. briefly talks about the Kusaal language and its speakers and 1.3 looks at personal names as cultural artifacts. Section 2.0 examines the syntactic structure of Kusaal personal names while the morphological analysis of Kusaal personal names is the focus in section 3.0. In section 4.0, the phonological analysis of personal is discussed and section 5.0 provides a conclusion to the paper.

This study is qualitative in nature as it describes language use in its natural context. It is entirely textual, devoid of any statistical analysis. The data form part of the daily discourses of speakers of the Kusaal language in the Upper East Region of Ghana. About seventy percent (70%) of the Kusaal personal names used in this study were gathered from the class attendance registers of pupils in a basic school in Barbuaka, a suburb in the Garu District of the Upper East Region of Ghana in 2022. The meaning of the names were cross-checked using four elders whose ages are between 50 and 80 years and are native speakers of Kusaal. These are Ayamba Asandaug (Male, 57 years), Apengi Azumbilla (Male, 80 years), and Awimbun Ayaaba (Female, 66 years). All reside in Bansi in the Binduri District and Sampson Abuosi (Male 55 years) from Kuksabila, in the Garu District. Unfortunately, Apengi Azumbilla is late at the time of putting this together. The two were chosen because they

have deep cultural knowledge of the Kusaas and have lived all their lives in the Kusaug traditional area. We also conducted a semi-structured interview with four graduate students who are studying at the University of Education, Winneba and are native speakers of Kusaal. These are: Moses Aputeeda (Male, 35 years), John Ndeogo Ayaabugri (Male, 37 years), Justina Anane (Female, 36 years), Grace Akotey (Female, 35 years). These interviews were recorded and transcribed for purposes of this work. The secondary source of data includes names which were drawn from 2014 matriculation and 2019–2021 graduation books of The University of Education, Winneba where two of the authors come from. These matriculation and graduation books contain names of students who bare Kusaal personal names. It is important to add that all the three authors are native speakers of Kusaal and their personal intuitions played a role in identifying data that potentially needed extra attention and consultations.

Kusaal is a minority language spoken by the group of people called the Kusaa (SG), Kusaas (PL). It falls under the Central Mabilia subgroup of Mabilia languages (Bodomo, 2020), which was called the Western Oti-Volta subgroup of Gur languages (Westermann and Bryan, 1952; Greenberg, 1963) of the Niger–Congo language family. The endonym ‘Mabilia’ is a compound word composed of two nouns: *ma* ‘mother’ and *bia* ‘child’ and means ‘mother’s child’/‘sibling’. Bodomo (2020: 11) explains that the meaning of this endonym renders credence to the fact that these languages are metaphorically believed to have been born from a single mother or proto language hence the argument that this term is more representative of the languages under this group since these two words can be traced in almost all the languages compared to the term ‘Gur’ which is derived from the initial syllables of only three/four of the languages in this group: Gurenisi, Gurma and Gurene (see Bodomo, 2020).

The Kusaal language is spoken in three West African countries: Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo. However, the data on personal names that are analysed in this paper are collected from the Ghanaian community although some of these names may also be traced in Burkina Faso and Togo. In Ghana, Kusaal is spoken in the Upper East Region of the country. The Kusaug traditional area has six district capitals: Bawku, Garu-Tempani, Pusiga, Zebilla, and Binduri (see Abubakari 2018, 2020, 2022). Kusaal has two dialects: Agolle and Atoende. The Atoende dialect is spoken in Zebilla and its surrounding areas and the Agolle dialect is spoken in Bawku Municipal, Garu-Tempane and adjoining areas. Fig. 1¹ is the map of the Upper East Region of Ghana showing Kusaal-speaking communities. It is taken from Abubakari (2022).

Abubakari (2018, 2020) argues that although there is no official census on the number of speakers of Kusaal, it is estimated that there are over 2 million people who use the language

as their native language across the West African sub-regions. Data gathered from the Ghana Statistical Service Department, according to the 2010 population and housing census, shows that there are 534,681 speakers of Kusaal in Ghana. With a total population of 24,658,823 (GSS, 2012) people in Ghana, the Kusaas make approximately 2.2% of the population of Ghana as at 2010 (Abubakari, 2018, 2020).

Undeniably, personal names in Kusaal go beyond assigning identities to persons as Abubakari (2020) rightly opines, 'any name given to a child in the Kusaal community is expected to have some kind of impact on the bearer both positively and negatively'. A name is not selected randomly for a newborn baby among the Kusaas. There are several cultural dimensions that are considered before a name is conferred on a baby. Paramount among these is the religious factor. A soothsayer or diviner is traditionally consulted to divine if the newborn is an ancestor or associated with any spirit or god for which reason the ancestor's name or the god's or spirit's name should be given to it. Additionally, the belief that the destiny as well as the future of a newborn baby or a person is encapsulated in the name it bears is kernel among the Kusaas. Thus, personal names are symbolic of the beliefs and cultural values of the Kusaas (Abubakari, 2020; Abubakari et al., 2023). Among the Kusaas, personal names are believed to have the protective powers such that they are even used as weapons against death. Neonatal deaths are curbed by the use of death preventive names (Abubakari, 2020; Abubakari et al., 2023). Personal names also allow people to express their emotions and experiences of particular moments in history. People name their newborns based on their current circumstances or experiences. Some of these names maybe innuendos and proverbial. The name bearer metaphorically becomes a 'historical record' such as the individual by virtue of its name reminds people of the experience of the name giver at the time the name was given. These could be both pleasant and bitter memories. The names *Nde-daug* (M), *Nde-pɔka* (F) mean a parent of the name bearer saw chameleons mating during the pregnancy. This is a taboo and to atone for this, the baby is names after the taboo object, a chameleon. The name *Akaagur* 'Have no protector/guardian' could also be an innuendo when one feels he/she has been rejected by people who should provide some protection (see Abubakari, 2020; Abubakari et al., 2023 for details). Notwithstanding these social and cultural functions of personal names in Kusaal, another interesting aspect of these names that must not be overlooked is their linguistic structure which is central to the discussion of this paper.

Section snippets

Syntactic analysis of Kusaal personal names

The basic sentence structure of Kusaal is Subject+Verb+Object (SVO) (Abubakari 2011, 2018; Musah 2010, 2018; Eddyshaw 2019; Niggli, 2014 among others). Personal names in Kusaal can be in the forms of phrases and sentences. There are names that are of the structures: simple, complex and compound complex sentences. All such names follow the word order of sentences in the language. Additionally, personal names that are sentences also perform the functions of their respective sentence types....

Morphological analysis of Kusaal personal names

Morphology concerns word formation and how words in the same language relate to one another. Most of the personal names in Kusaal are derived from common nouns, proper nouns and abstract nouns that refer to deities and shrines, day names, fauna and flora names, circumstantial names, objects, experiences, innuendos among others (Abubakari 2020). Names are also derived from verbs and other lexical categories in the language. To differentiate personal names from nouns, verbs and other lexical...

Phonological analysis of Kusaal personal names

The syllable structure of Kusaal is comprised of the regular syllable types: N, V, CV, CVC, CVN, CVV (Abubakari 2018) as also observed in (Musah 2010, 2017, 2018). The formation of personal names also conforms to this phonotactics. The syllable structure of Kusaal does not permit consonant clusters within syllables. This implies that a personal name in Kusaal which comprises two or more morphemes must have a way to avoid clusters of consonants. This section looks at some phonological processes...

Conclusion

This study was set out to analyse the core aspects of syntax, semantics, morphology and phonology of personal names in Kusaal. Syntactically, it is revealed that Kusaal personal names can be phrasal or clausal forms where the types of phrasal forms identified are noun phrases and verb phrases and personal names that take clauses do not have overt subjects. At sentential or functional level, Kusaal personal names occur as simple sentences that take transitive or intransitive verbs as...

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Hasiyatu Abubakari: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.
Lawrence Sandow: Writing – review & editing, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation.
Samuel Akugri Asitanga: Writing – review & editing, Validation, Investigation, Data curation....

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