NICKNAMES IN BINI AND ENGLISH:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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While the purpose of this paper is partially descriptive, its primary aim is to contribute to the search for onomastic universals by comparing hypocoristics in two languages which are so distant from one another, both geographically and genealogically, that mutual influence may be assumed to be minimal.

Bini is the leading language of the Mid-West Region of Nigeria. It is spoken, as either a first or a second language, by about a million hoe horticulturists in and around Benin City, long famous as the capital of an indigenous African empire and the seat of a vigorous tradition of bronze portrait sculpture. The Congoid family to which it belongs includes Yoruba and Swahili.

Similarities between Bini and English nicknames are surprisingly many. Phonologically, both languages lean heavily toward palimphony, or phoneme repe tion within words. Examples are obolo, "Fatso" (from the base of bolozo, "fat"), and Nan (from Ann). And in both languages, internal affixation in compound names consists of bilabial consonants. Examples are Ehenmeèhèn (the name of a monarch, originally a reduplicative nickname derived from oheen, "priest") and Georgy-Porgy, from George.

Morphologically, both languages exhibit hypocoristic affixation. Examples are evbavba, "Daddy," and emama, "Mommy." In each case, Bini adds a prefix where English adds a suffix to forms referring intimately to father and mother, respectively. And both languages make extensive use of reduplication. Examples of non-kin terms are ùbebe, "Rascal" (from bebe, "to be naughty") and Jojo (from Joseph).

As regards word-length, both languages typically form nicknames by abridging formal names. Examples are ode, "Streeter" (shortened from Abievbodè, "Born on the Road") and Sue (the "stump-form" of Susan). In Bini, although formal names may have as many as eight syllables, nicknames are restricted to a maximum of six. Similarly, while English given names may have four syllables, nicknames are restricted to a maximum of three.

Etymologically, too, Bini and English share a trait. Both are very hospitable to hypocoristic loanwords. Bini, in fact, has even developed a special tone pattern (low-low-high) for nicknames of English derivation. Examples are Ewili, "Willy" (for William), Esòlo, "Solly" (for Solomon), and Ènàtà, "Nat" (for Nathan). The hospitality of English is extended chiefly to nicknames of Romanic origin. Examples are Janet (from Old French), Mimi (from Modern French), and Lola (from Spanish).

Despite these overall similarities, however, there are many differences of detail between the hypocoristic patterns of Bini and those of English. Bini has no monosyllabic nicknames because of its morphotactic rule that all noun bases must be preceded by vowel prefixes. And it has no palindromic

nicknames comparable to English Bob (for Robert), because its phonotactic rules prohibit closed syllables. Bini, moreover, exhibits no sound-shifts comparable to the occlusion of interdental fricatives in English Dot and Ted (for Dorothy and Theodore). Although both languages exhibit hypocoristic phoneme repetition, the phonemes repeated in Bini are usually vowels, while those repeated in English are usually consonants.

In the realm of morphology, Bini lacks hypocoristic suffixes comparable to the augmentative -o in English Danno or the diminutive -y in English Danny (both from Daniel).

A semantic difference between the onomastic patterns of the two languages is that Bini seems to lack toponymic and chrematonymic nicknames like English Philly (for Philadelphia) and Chevvy (for Chevrolet automobile).

A final difference between Bini and English is etymological in nature. Bini lacks polygenic nicknames like English Hal (which may stand either for Henry or for Harold).

Such surveys as the foregoing, of course, raise as many questions as they answer. Some of the questions are practical matters of definition. For example, should ethnic slur-words like English Wog, "non-Anglo-Saxon," or Bini Ighonmiighòn, "non-Bini," be classifedd as collective nicknames?

Other such questions are theoretical and less amenable to solution by fiat. One of these is whether the relative brevity of nicknames is iconic--either in the literal sense that nicknames refer primarily to people of abbreviated stature (namely, children) or in the figurative sense that nicknames abridge the formality of non-hypocoristic appellations. Another is whether, at least at the subliminal level, all nicknames are not ambivalent, since whatever is diminutive may elicit affection, compassion, ridicule, contempt, or any combination of these reactions.

NOTES

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Roger W. Wescott, A Bini Grammar (Vol. 1, Phonology; Vol. 2, Morphology; Vol. 3, Lexemics), the United States Office of Education, Washington, D.C. 1963.

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