

## Phonological strategies for the adaptation of English names by Ósósò speakers

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### Abstract

This paper identifies and describes the different adaptation strategies employed to modify acquired English names by Ósósò indigenes where these names do not originally conform with the permissible syllable structure of proper nouns in the language. Data for the study are drawn from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data are from 20 female and 10 male speakers, specifically those over fifty years of age. In all, 40 common English names were examined. Secondary data is from the New Testament of the Holy Bible recently produced through the concerted efforts of the Christians in Ósósò community. The work is purely descriptive. The study discovers that onsetless nominals like ‘Mary’, ‘Francis’, are assigned the default high front vowel /i/ with low tone to become ‘imèrí’, L-L-H, ifirànsì L-L-L-H-L and consonant clusters are interspersed with the same vowel /i/. The paper also finds out that Ósósò, as a tone language, assigns tonal melody to all the English names studied even though English is stress timed. As a major contribution, the paper shows modifications that apply in the onomastics of two different systems when borrowing occurs.

**Keywords:** Name, English, Ósósò, Phonology, Modifications.

## 1. Introduction

The practice of having a personal name according to Mensah (2021, p. 1) ‘are a significant aspect of different cultures around the world, and naming practices, traditions and patterns vary across cultures’. Among the Ósósò people, most loanwords in the language comes from English and Yoruba. The names borne by the indigenes, aside their native names, also come from these two languages. The English names came historically from colonization, advent of Christianity, migration and broad influence of the English language. Mensah (2021, p. 1) further noted that “the precolonial and colonial eras of Nigeria witnessed increasing contact between English and Nigerian languages, mostly due to the activities of many Christian evangelical missions”. Beyond setting aside their traditional beliefs and cultural practices, Katoke (1984, p. 7) reports that ‘the most important change for the African Christians converts among other things, was an acceptance of a European name’.

Many of these names however violated the permissible syllable structure of proper nouns in the indigenous languages of the new converts necessitating modifications reflecting the phonotactics of their various languages. This study employs a descriptive approach to the investigation of loanword nativization in Ósósò language. It particularly investigates the different phonological strategies employed by the speakers of Ósósò to modify names that violate the syllable structure of their language, following the adaptation of English names. It examines a corpus of data and reports its findings on loanwords and adapted names.

When words are borrowed from one language (known as the source language) into another (known as the target language), they sometimes do not conform to the acceptable phonological structure of words in the target language. These irregular forms in the borrowed words trigger certain modification processes targeted at making them conform to the structure of words in the lexicon of the target (or borrowing) language. According to Evbuomwan (2014, pp. 26-27), “the term borrowing is seen as the process by which foreign linguistic items are made to become part of a language, while a loanword is that linguistic item that has completely undergone the process of borrowing”. A borrowed word is therefore

seen here-in as a linguistic unit or term used in a language to which it does not originally belong. Names, being the borrowed linguistic unit addressed by this paper, is defined within the field of Anthroponomy, which is a branch of Onomastics (Algeo, 2010). The term refers to "what somebody or something is known by and distinguished from other people or things" (Olatunji et' al 2015, p. 75). Essien (1986, p. 5) summed it this way "naming is not an arbitrary affair, it is at once a mental, an emotional, a linguistic and cultural matter". Any borrowed name that does not conform to the linguistic structure of the borrowing language is modified. These modifications as applied by speakers of Ósósò are addressed in this work.

## **2. The Ósósò language**

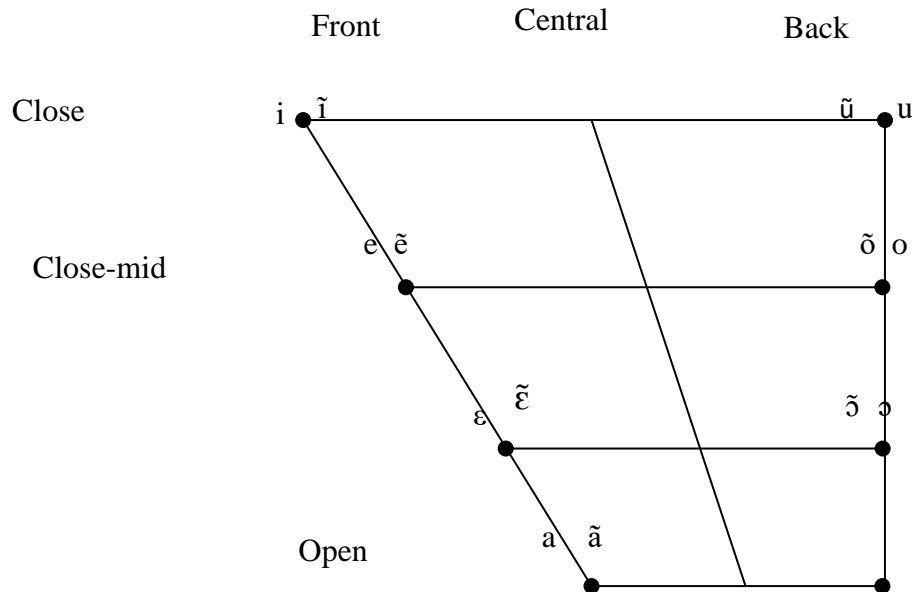
Although non-indigenes and diaspora speakers often call it Ọsósò [òsòsò], native speakers call their language Ósósò [ósósò]. Ósósò ((ISO 639-3 oso, Glottolog osos 1238) is spoken by over one hundred thousand people spread across Òkhè, Ánní, Ìkpèná and Égbètùà quarters in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo State, in the South-South geopolitical zone of the present-day Nigeria. The language falls under the West Benue-Congo substrate of the Niger Congo Phyla. Elugbe (1989) and Lewis (2012) classified Ósósò as Proto North Central Edoid (PNCE) in the Edoid language family tree. Both the people, the community and the language are known as Ósósò.

As Legbeti (2024, p. 94) posits, Ósósò has a total of thirty (30) consonants and seven (07) phonemic vowels, (all oral. No nasal vowels, only nasalized vowels), as shown in the charts below.

## 1: Ósósò Phonemic Consonants (Legbeti, 2024)

	Bilabial		Labio-dentals		Alveolar		Palato-Alveolar		Palatal	Velar		Labio-Velar	
Plosives	p	b			t	d				k	g	kp	gb
Lenis plosive		bh				dh							
Affricate					ts		tʃ	dʒ					
Nasal		m				n				ɲ			
Lenis Nasal		mh											
Fricative	β		f	v	s	z	ʃ			x	ɣ		
Trill					ʀ	r							
Approximant										j			w
Lateral						l							

## 2: Ósósò Vowels (Legbeti, 2022)



Two syllable types are identified in Ósósò: V and CV. A phonetic CCV structure is observed to occur in words in which glide formation has applied, in which case a vowel is realized as a glide consonant. Ósósò has no consonant clusters. Also, the language operates an open syllable type in which each word ends in a pronounceable vowel. In addition to the above, all nouns in the language begin with vowels.

## 3. Methodology

The data for this study was elicited from 30 Ósósò speakers comprising 20 females and 10 males, all of which were over fifty years of age. Other demographic variables that guided the choice of informants include place of early childhood and residence, level of education, and occupation. These criteria became imperative to ensure that the data analyzed in the study reflect the natural way in which the words are used by the Ósósò speakers and eliminate, as

much as possible, the anglicization of Ósósò words by the younger speakers of the language. Secondary data from the New Testament Bible as pronounced by Ósósò speakers during various denominational church meetings were also gathered and considered in the study. The conversations with the language consultants were collected and recorded by means of a Dictaphone digital voice recorder and stored in .wav format for subsequent playback. Upon playback, the occurring names were extracted from the conversations and noted by means of paper and pen in both orthographic and phonetic forms, showing the different modifications observed in the pronounced forms. The extracted data were organized into different groups, as guided by the different strategies observed to have been employed by the users in the modification of the names. The organized data were further read out to some of the informants in view of verification before they were placed under observation and analysis. The analysis of the data was done by carefully observing the different strategies for modification of the borrowed forms and the observed patterns are as discussed in this paper.

#### **4. Adaptation Strategies**

Across available data, different adaptation strategies are seen in the adoption of English names by Ósósò speakers. These modification strategies include vowel epenthesis, sound substitution and segment deletion; these processes hardly apply in isolation. What this means is that in the collected data, a fully adapted lexical item has instances of different strategies already employed in its adaptation. These strategies are discussed in the sections below.

##### **4.1. Vowel Epenthesis**

Insertion of vowels are intrusive strategies employed by languages to break vowel hiatus and consonant clusters to ensure borrowed words conform to the phonotactics of the borrowing language. Vowel insertion at initial, mid and final positions in the names Ósósò

adopted from English are motivated by the asymmetry in the morpheme and syllable structures of both languages. Based on the corpus of data available to the present study, one very productive strategy for adapting English names into Ósósò is the addition of the default vowel /i/ to the English name. This it does as a way naturalization.

#### 4.1.1 Word Initial Vowel Epenthesis

The addition of a vowel to the beginning of a word, referred to as prothesis, is highly productive in Ósósò, more than half of the names examined by this study had this strategy applied. The following are examples of English names that are modified in the language by adding a vowel to their word initial positions.

3.	<b>English</b>		<b>modified form</b>	<b>gloss</b>
a)	/meəri:/	→	[ìmári]    ìmári	‘Mary’
b)	/mɒnɪkə/	→	[ìmòníkà]    ìmòníkà	‘Monica’
c)	/debərə/	→	[ìdèbórà]    ìdèbórà	‘Deborah’
d)	/mɑ:əθ/	→	[ìmátà]    ìmátà	‘Martha’
e)	/rɪˈbɛkə/	→	[ìrèbékà]    ìrèbékà	‘Rebecca’
f)	/pi:tə/	→	[ìpítà]    ìpítà	‘Peter’
g)	/dʒɒʃʊə/	→	[ìdʒòʃúwà]    ìjòshúwà	‘Joshua’
h)	/mɑ:kəs/	→	[ìmàkòsì]    ìmàkòsì	‘Marcus’
i)	/tɒməs/	→	[ìtòmòsì]    ìtòmòsì	‘Thomas’
j)	/stɛlə /	→	[ìsìtèlá]    isìtèla	‘Stella’

In each of the examples presented above, vowel /i/ is added to the onset to modify the names in such a way that they begin with a vowel. Based on all the data analyzed in the study, vowel /i/ is the only vowel that is selected to participate in the naturalization of borrowed English

names into Ósósò language when prothesis is applied for the purpose of adaptation. The introduction of an epenthetic vowel at word initial position is triggered by the nominal structure rule in Ósósò language, which holds that all nouns obligatorily begin with a pronounceable vowel. Thus, when a name is borrowed into the language from English and such a name begins with a consonant, the vowel /i/ is added at the beginning so that the violation of the word initial onsetless syllable requirement rule for nouns in the language is repaired. In instances where a rounded vowel occurs in adjacent syllable, the prothesis vowel still remains the unrounded vowel /i/, overriding the labial harmony constraint and affirming that labial harmony rule does not apply to prothetic vowels in Ósósò.

Stress replacement with tone height also occurs. Each of the names presented in example 3a-j above is realized by the Ósósò speakers as tonal since Ósósò is a tonal language. What this means is that the stress feature on each of the syllables is replaced with a tonal pitch height. Other changes that are also observed in the above data include instances of vowel change. As we shall discuss later in details, certain vowels not found in the sound system of Ósósò language are replaced with closest vowels to the ones that occur in the original forms of the English names.

#### **4.1.2 Word Medial Vowel Insertion**

There are also cases of vowel epenthesis in which a vowel is inserted in the middle of the English name as a syllable repair strategy for the adaptation of such names into the Ósósò language. This is imperative since the language disallows consonant clusters. Consider the following examples:



4.	<b>English</b>	→	<b>modified form</b>		<b>gloss</b>
a)	/ægnɪs/	→	[àgìnésì]	àgìnésì	‘Agnes’
b)	/vɪk'tɔ:ɪə/	→	[ìvìkìtòríà]	ìvìkìtòríà	‘Victoria’
c)	/flɒrəns/	→	[ìfìlòrésì]	ìfìlòrésì	‘Florence’
d)	/kæ: θ(ə).ɪn/	→	[ìkàtìrínì]	ìkàtìrínì	‘Catherine’
e)	/fɹɑ:nsɪs/	→	[ìfìrāsìsì]	ìfìrán(i)sìsì	‘Francis’
f)	/dʒeɪmz/	→	[ìdʒémísì]	ìjàmísì	‘James’
g)	/pæt.rɪk/	→	[ìpàtìrìkì]	ìpàtìrìkì	‘Patrick’
h)	/fɹɑ:nsɪz/	→	[ìfìrāsìsì]	ìfìrànse-sì	‘Frances’
i)	/stɛlə/	→	[ìsìtèlá]	ìsìtèlá	‘Stella’
j)	/geɪb.ɪəl /	→	[ìgèbùrèlì]	ìgèbùrèlì	‘Gabriel’

In these examples, it is observed that each of the English names containing consonant clusters are seen to have been modified (or repaired) in the derived Ósósò forms of the given names. The clusters are modified by the insertion of an appropriate Ósósò vowel in-between the consonants that combines to form the clusters, thus gn → gin (in 4a), kt → kit (in 4b), fl → fil (in 4c), tr → tir (in 4d), fr → fir (in 4e), mz → mis (as in 4f), and so on. The insertion of the vowel helps result into the permissible CV structure by separating the two clustering consonants into different syllables. The first consonant in the cluster serves as the onset of one syllable while the second vowel serves as the onset of a following syllable.

It is also observed that some of these examples in 4 contain instances of tonal imposition and vowel change, as earlier noted in the preceding section based on the examples in data 3.

### 4.1.3 Word final vowel insertion

The addition of a vowel to the word final position of a word is known as paragoge. This process is seen to have also been used for the modification of some names borrowed from English into Ósósò language. This is illustrated in the following:

5.	<b>English</b>		<b>modified form</b>	<b>gloss</b>
a)	/mɑ:gərət/	→	[ìmàgírètì]    ìmàgírètì	‘Margaret’
b)	/ɪˈlɪzəbəθ/	→	[èlìzàbétì]    èlìzàbétì	‘Elizabeth’
c)	/su:zən/	→	[ìsùzánà]    ìsùzánà	‘Suzan’
d)	/pɔ:l/	→	[ìpólù]    ìpólù	‘Paul’
e)	/pæəs/	→	[ìpàyósì]    ìpàyósì	‘Pius’
f)	/rəʊz/	→	[ìròsì]    ìròsì	‘Rose’
g)	/rɪtʃəd/	→	[ìrìtʃádi]    ìrìtʃádi	‘Richard’
h)	/wɪljəm/	→	[ìwìljémù]    ìwìljémù	‘William’
i)	/dʒænət/	→	[ìdʒènétì]    ìdʒènétì	‘Janet’
j)	/ru:θ/	→	[ìrútù]    ìrútù	‘Ruth’

In these examples, the original English forms of the presented names violate the morpheme structure rule for nouns in the Ósósò language which requires that nominal forms in the language obligatorily end in pronounceable vowels. Given that Ósósò is an open syllable language, and these English forms end in consonants, the strategy employed to remedy these violations in these examples is the introduction of an appropriate vowel to the end of each name. It is notable that unlike in the word initial and word medial vowel epenthesis already discussed above, the selection of an appropriate vowel in this case is not restricted to the front high vowel /i/, as illustrated in example 3c, 3h and 3g where the low vowel /a/ and the high vowel /u/ are preferred against what is observed in the other examples (that is, 5a-b, d-f)

where the vowel /i/ is added. Another equally noteworthy strategy is the replacement of diphthongs with vowels derived from its form and obtainable in the vowel system of Ósósò. There is also the imposition of tonal melody.

Consonant and vowel substitution as found in the data are discussed in the following section.

#### 4.2. Sound Substitution

As already noted in the discussions presented in 4.1, above, sounds that occur in the borrowed English names but are not attested in the Ósósò phonological inventory are replaced by available ones. Consider the following examples.

#### 6. Vowel substitution

	<b>English</b>		<b>modified form</b>	<b>gloss</b>
a)	/dʒeɪkəb/	→	[ìdʒèkóbù]    ìjàkóbù	‘Jacob’
b)	/flɒrəns/	→	[ìfilòrénsì]    ifilòrénsì	‘Florence’
c)	/mɒnɪkə/	→	[ìmóníkà]    ìmóníkà	‘Monica’
d)	/ɪˈlɪzəbæθ/	→	[èlizàbètì]    èlizàbètì	‘Elizabeth’
e)	/rəʊz/	→	[ìròsì]    ìròsì	‘Rose’
f)	/dʒeɪmz/	→	[ìdʒémísì]    ìjàmísì	‘James’
g)	/daɪˈæn/	→	[ìdàjínà]    idàyínà	‘Dianne’
h)	/sæmjʊəl/	→	[ìsàmùjéli]    isàmùyéli	‘Samuel’

#### 7. Consonant substitution

	<b>English</b>		<b>modified form</b>	<b>gloss</b>
a)	/mɑːθə/	→	[ìmátà]    ìmátà	‘Martha’
b)	/dʒuːdɪə/	→	[ìdʒùdíti]    ìjùdíti	‘Judith’

- c) /ɪ'lɪzəbəθ/ → [èlìzàbétì] èlìzàbétì 'Elizabeth'  
 d) /rəʊz/ → [íròsì] íròsì 'Rose'  
 e) /dʒeɪmz/ → [ìdʒèmísì] ìjàmísì 'James'

In the examples presented as 6a-g, occurring vowels that are not available in the sound inventory of Ósósò language are substituted or replaced with vowels that are attested in the language. As observed in these examples, /ɑ/ in the first syllable is replaced with /a/ while the schwa /ə/ in the second and third syllables is replaced with /i/ and /ɛ/, respectively, in 6a. In 6b, /ɒ/ is replaced with /ɔ/ while /ə/ changes to /ɛ/. In 6c, /ɒ/ is also realized as /ɔ/, while /ɪ/ and /ə/ are realized as /i/ and /a/, respectively. In examples 6d-f, /ɪ/ at word initial position changes to /e/, the same vowel at word medial position is realized as /i/, the diphthongs /əʊ/ and /eɪ/ are substituted with /o/ and /e/, respectively, changing their qualities from complex to simple forms. Similar approximations of vowels in English to those in Ósósò can also be seen in 6g and 6h.

In the examples presented in 7a-e, it is observed that some consonants are substituted with others in the Ósósò language. For instance, the consonant /θ/ (in 7a-c) which is not available in the language is realized as /t/ in all cases. It is also observed, as shown in 7d-e, that the voiced alveolar fricative /z/ is replaced with the voiceless counterpart /s/.

The substitution of sounds is triggered by the principle of economy where preference is for segments that are easier to pronounce. In the first instance, language users will find it easier to produce sounds that are available in their respective languages than those that are not. Thus, the sounds that are not attested in Ósósò language, which occur in the English names, are replaced with those that are attested in the language, as part of the adaptation process. Even in 7d-e where both /z/ and the realized /s/ in the modified names exist in both Ósósò language and English languages, the Ósósò speakers make preference for the more easily produced voiceless /s/ over the voiced counterpart /z/.

### 4.3. Segment Deletion

Although not overly productive, instances of segments and morpheme deletion form part of the modification strategy based on the data analysed in this study. This occurs as a way of simplifying complex forms. For instance, one of the two consonants that form a cluster may be deleted as an alternative to the insertion of a vowel in-between them. Consider the following examples.

8.	English		modified form		gloss
a)	/dʒu:lɪət/	→	[ìdʒùlì]	ìjùlì	‘Juliet’
b)	/mɑ:θə/	→	[ìmátà]	ìmátà	‘Martha’
c)	/tʃɑ:lz/	→	[ìtʃási]	ìcháli	‘Charles’
d)	/fɪləmɪ:nə/	→	[ifilo]	ifilo	‘Philomina’

In each of these cases, a consonant is deleted as part of the modification of the English names when they are used in the Ósósò language. In 6a, the consonant /t/ is deleted at word final position to produce a codaless syllable at that position. This is useful in ensuring that the borrowed English name is used in such a way that it does not violate the open syllable structure requirement rule in Ósósò language where names in Ósósò end in pronounceable vowels. In 8b, /r/ is dropped at word medial position, before /θ/ since it is not a natural form in the Ósósò language. In 8c, the cluster of /l/ and /z/ at word final position is opened up by the deletion of /z/ before a vowel is added to the end of the name to give the required open syllable permitted by the language.

Even at instances of other English names derived from event or circumstance of birth, modification strategies also applies where such names violate the permissible structure in Ósósò as shown in the examples below:

9.	<b>English</b>		<b>modified form</b>		<b>gloss</b>
	a) /bles.ɪŋ/	→	[ìbùlésìni]	ìjùlì	‘Blessing
	b) /mɑ:rvələs/	→	[ìmávilósì]	ìmávilósì	‘Marvelous’
	c) /feivə/	→	[ìfavò]	ìfavò	‘Favo(u)r’
	d) /pɹɪns/	→	[ìpìrĩsì]	ìpìrĩnsì	‘Prince’
	e) /mɪrəkəl/	→	[ìmíràkùlù]	ìmíràkùlù	‘Miracle’

## 5. Conclusion

This study has investigated the modification strategies employed by Ósósò language speakers when they adopt English names. The study analysed synchronic Ósósò data purposely to show the modifications of English names to fit into the nominal word structure of the language to enable them to use these names. The observation in this study shows that adaptation strategy involved in the modification of the borrowed 40 English names that constitute the data for this work include vowel epenthesis at word initial, medial and final positions where the open front unrounded [i] vowel is often the vowel deployed when a vowel is needed for intrusive operation. Also, in Ósósò, vowels and consonants substitution, as well as segment deletion form another type of strategy in different contexts.

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