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Syntactic Categories and Semantic Features of English Lexemes Used as Christian Names in Northern Nigeria

Joel Iyiola Olaleye.

Department of English, Waziri Umaru Federal Polytechnic, Birnin Kebbi.

leyelinguist@yahoo.com

Toyese Najeem Dahunsi

General Studies Department, Federal Polytechnic, Ile-Oluji, Ondo State, Nigeria.

deoladahunsi@gmail.com

Onomastics is a linguistic enquiry interested in the exploration of origin, linguistic forms and functionality of personal names. However, little attention has been given to the investigation of naming practices among Christians. This study therefore aims at applying the generativists' notion of binary features and the concept of Semantic Prosody to investigate the syntactic and semantic properties of selected English lexemes used as Christian baby names in Northern Nigeria. To achieve this aim, the study attempts to: classify the selected data into grammatical categories in order to discover the syntactic device used for naming system; explore the semantic prosodic features of the selected lexemes with a view to discovering the attitudinal factor underlying their choices; investigate how gender distinction is attached to common words; and, discover the lexical innovations in the selected words. The study demonstrated that the device of functional shift (word class conversion) was predominantly used for naming. Also, words with positive semantic prosodic feature were used to encode religious, cultural and philosophical thoughts of name-givers. It was discovered that both masculine and feminine gender qualities were attributed to neutral words. Also, abstract words were assigned human (concrete) referents. On the basis of these findings, it was concluded that the English words used among the Northern Nigerian Christian naming system have been re-contextualised from common everyday words to proper names, thereby constituting a lexical set or special vocabulary of Christendom in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Onomastics, Binary Features, Semantic Prosody, Conversion/Functional Shift*

Introduction

Onomastics or onomasiology, a branch of semantics, according to Hartmann (2005), is the "study of personal and place names". In other words, onomastics is a branch of semantics that concerns itself with the study of origin, linguistic forms and functionality of personal and place names. Brendler (2012, p.30) argues that name is considered an onomastic concept because it does not only have grammatical structures (such as phonology, morphology, semantics, etymology), but also have functionality or referential potential by which an individual person or a particular object is denoted. Rosenhouse (2002, p.97) is also of the view that "personal names are part of any language and obey most of its general rules, whether phonological, morphological, syntactic, orthographic or semantic." The emergence of literary onomastics in recent years has also advanced the study of characters in literary texts. Windt-Val (2012, p.284) asserts that "literary onomastics, the investigation of names in literature, is still a young discipline, but more and more literary critics are becoming aware of the importance of names in the interpretation of novels and authorships." It is obvious from

the various submissions that names are valid objects of linguistic analysis because the process underlying their innovation involves the use of language resources.

The linguistic act of naming a new baby in Nigeria as an example involves a conscious effort of name-givers to reflect certain variables (e.g. religion, sex, culture, etc.) and circumstantial values of the baby. The significance of name in human existence cannot be trivialised because it does not only provide a means to identify an individual uniquely in the world; but is also a process of classifying an individual according to religious affiliation, sex, tribe, family, and birth circumstances. This is why Jauro, Ngamsa and Wappa (2013, p. 1) assert that "onomastics or onomatology is of great importance to human existence, especially in Africa where people value culture, language and communication."

Donovan (1976, p.10) says that "religious language is an affective language because it affects people's feelings, enters into their imagination, influences their emotions and often gives the impression of conveying profound truth." Thus, among the Christians, a certain Christian ideology often intrudes on the consciousness of name-givers and acts as a motivating factor for christening new babies. Personal names, according to Al-Zumor (2009, p.15), "form a special group within the vocabulary of a language". Stemming from this submission, English words used as Christian names therefore belong to a special group of the vocabulary of religious language. Human potentialities to use language resource to achieve specific purposes manifest in the way some common English lexemes are used for naming especially, in Christendom.

In spite of the abundance of the traditional Christian names or Bible names such as Paul, Timothy, Joel, Abraham, Jacob, Isiah, Jeremiaiah, Hannah, Deborah, Esther, Rebecca, etc.; it is a commonplace, especially in the Northern Nigeria, to hear children say my Christian name is *Peace*, *Endurance*, *Hope*, *Joy*, *Good-Luck*, *Grace*, *Mercy*, *Favour*, *Blessing*, *Glory*, *Praise*, *Goodness*, *Promise*, *Virtue*, *Love*, *Miracle*, *Testimony*, *Faith*, etc. The act of using such English lexemes as baby names is outright alienation to the Muslims. Thus, such English lexemes have been fostered and recontextualised among Nigerian Christians to become uniquely Christian names. This explains why Abdul (2014, p.61) argues that "generally, people misconstrue English names to be Christian religious names." Hence, the use of English words has become a naming practice among Christians especially in Nigeria.

Abdul (2014, p.12) also maintains that "the study of personal names has received considerable attention (sic) from both linguists and anthropologists over the years." Among others, some influential research works in the field of linguistics which investigate naming practices include Dalfayo (1982), Onukawa (2000), Guma (2001), Lombard (2008), Abdul (2014) and Agbo (2014). Dalfayo (1982), for instance, explored Logbara personal names and their relation to religions. Onukawa's (2000) work focuses on the Chi Concept in Igbo Gender Naming. Using a historical and linguistic analysis, Guma (2001) is an investigation of the cultural meaning of names among Basotho of Southern Africa. Lombard (2008), Abdul (2014), and Agbo (2014) focus on personal names and naming from a cultural ethnographic perspective.

In spite of the previous researches on naming system, as far as the present researchers are aware, none has attempted to investigate the syntactic and semantic properties of English words used as christian names in the Northern Nigeria in particular. Therefore, the current work aims at investigating the syntactic and semantic characteristics of selected English words used as christian names in the Northern Nigeria, using the generativists' binary features and the concept of semantic prosody as analytical frameworks. To achieve this aim, The study attempts to: classify the selected data into grammatical categories in order to discover the syntactic device used for naming system; explore the semantic prosodic features of the selected data with a view to discovering the attitudinal factor underlying the choice of certain English words for naming; investigate how gender distinction is attached to common words in naming system; and, discover the lexical innovations in the selected words.

Syntactic Categories and Semantic Features of English Lexemes Used as Christian Names in Northern Nigeria

Methodology

The research methodology is essentially descriptive and analytical. The study is based on the employment of the generativists' notion of binary features and the concept of semantic prosody. The data used for the study were collected from the 2016/2017 Yearbooks of some Christian schools randomly selected from the three geo-political zones of Northern Nigeria. These include the Yearbooks of St. James Anglican College, BirninKebbi, Kebbi State (North West); St. Paul School, Sokoto, Sokoto State (North West); St. Joseph Monica Catholic School, Malali Kaduna, Kaduna State (North Central); St. Morumber College, Jos, Plateau State (North Central); St Patrick's Primary and Secondary School, Western Maiduri, Borno State (North East); and the United Methodist Church Primary and Secondary School, Jalingo, Taraba State (North East). In all, a total of 105 English lexemes used as Christian names were garnered for the study.

Theoretical Framework

In linguistic enquiry about the nature of language, the concept of word class is fundamental to syntactic parsing of characterising words contained in a syntactic constituent into various grammatical categories. In other words, identifying the grammatical categories of elements of sentences is a necessary step to syntactic analysis of a text. Stemming from the grammatical approach to lexical studies of the Traditional Notational grammar, different grammatical approaches such as the Structuralism, Constructionism, Cognitivism, Functionalism and Generativism have endeavoured to advance language research about the natures of words at syntactic and semantic levels. In Traditional Notational Grammar, for instance, the typology of word was done in terms of parts of speech. Most modern linguists have however rescinded some of the views of the Traditional Grammar. Lyons (1965, p.209) argues that "the traditional notional theory of the parts of speech merits a rather more sympathetic consideration than it has received from most linguists in recent years."

In modern times, the most influential approaches to lexical studies are those of Functionalists and Generativists. The Functionalists, according to Halliday (1994, p.25), for instance, recognise that "there are in principle two significant ways of labelling a linguistic unit. One is to assign it to a class; the other is to assign a function to it." Within the frameworks of Functional linguistics, Bloor and Bloor (1997, p.262) define word class as "category of lexical item, roughly equivalent to traditional part of speech. The central word classes in Functional Grammar are: noun, adjective, numeral, determiner, verb, preposition, adverb, conjunction". Therefore, the functional linguists conduct a classification of words according to elements within groups, with groups exemplified by Bloor and Bloor (1997) as Nominal Group, Verbal Group, Adverbial Group, Prepositional Group, etc.

The early versions of Generative Grammar also benefited tremendously from the classificatory or notional method of Traditional Grammar in the treatment of word class. Hejl (2014, p.26) affirms this submission when he asserts that "generative grammarians also believed in an all-or-none view of category membership... For them, parts of speech were universal categories that were part of Universal Grammar." However, the later versions of the Generative Grammar discontinue from the notion of parts of speech. Baker (2009, p. 113) noted that:

In early works in generative grammar, the parts-of-speech classification of the traditional school of grammars was continued virtually without change, at least as regards such major lexical classes as noun, verb, and adjective. In the years since the publication of Chomsky's aspects of the theory of syntax 1965, however, there has been a good deal criticism of this traditional framework as a basis for the generative description of English."

In the Principles and Parameters version of generative grammar, nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are the four lexical categories which are considered universal (Hejl, 2014:12). In this version

of generative grammar, the four lexical categories “can be viewed as abstractions over sets of words displaying some common property or properties” (Aarts & Haegeman (2006). Using inflectional and distributional properties, they therefore define word class in terms of their morphosyntactic properties. Two binary features of N and V; each with negative or positive value were introduced. These are presented in table 1 as culled from Hejl (2014, p.26) as follows:

Table 1: Parts of speech within the Principles and Parameters version of generative grammar

	N	V
Nouns	+	-
Verbs	-	+
Adjectives	+	+
Adpositions	-	-

Hejl (2014, p.26)

In terms of syntactic or lexical category, names have been generally viewed among linguists to belong to Nominal Group (using a functionalists’ term) or Noun Phrase (using a generativists’ term). Some linguists have expressed the uncertainty of setting up some kind of difference in syntactic category between name and noun (Jenkins (2013, p.24). Thus, in terms of syntactic function and category, names cannot be distinguished from nouns. The term “mono-referential lexicalized noun phrase” was also evolved by Pamp (1998, p.252) to establish that a name, being a single lexical unit, functions as noun phrase. In spite of the widely held view that there is an inseparable rapprochement between names and noun, Anderson (2007, p.6), however, speculates about the grammatical class of name by probing if a name correlates in any way with membership of any grammatical category in the language system or if it should be regarded as a subcategory of noun. Jenkins (2013, p.24), in his own view submits that “the behavior of names in syntactic systems is essentially a question of lexical class (also known as lexical category, grammatical category, word class, part of speech).” It is obvious from this submission that common everyday words used as proper names belong to certain grammatical categories in terms of syntactic parsing. It is in this regard that the selected English words that are used as proper names among the Nigerian Christians were characterised into word classes in this study.

Within the frameworks of onomastics, there is a thorny argument among linguists regarding the semantic content and function of a name. This explains why Helleland (2012, p.99) asserts that “naturally, the terms “meaning” and “sense” have been discussed ardently in the course of the debates on theoretical onomastics. Jenkins (2013, p.27) also adds that “the semantics of proper names has been an issue for linguists and philosophers for thousands of years.” This serious contemplation arises as result of the speculation that whether a name has a meaning or sense beyond its reference. Helleland (2012, p.99) identifies the two main approaches to the question. The first holds that a name has reference, but is empty of meaning; while the other is of the view that a name is brimful of (connotative) meaning. Jenkins (2013, p.30) sums up the position of the first approach in the following words: “a word is a name when it is used as such, and at that time, it abandons most of its semantic similarities to all other lexical and semantic categories.” In other words, linguists who confine themselves to this approach believe that names cannot be decomposed or dissected based on other elements of language.

Syntactic Categories and Semantic Features of English Lexemes Used as Christian Names in Northern Nigeria

Since the focus of this paper is an exploration of common everyday English words that are used for naming system in Christendom, it is certain that such words embody meanings and language users select the words to aptly convey their communicative intention in a social discourse. We therefore confine ourselves to the approach which holds that names do not only perform referential function but also embody meaning. It is our stance in this regard that Christian name-givers consider meanings in their selection of words for naming; otherwise, words such as *Sorrow*, *Failure*, *Distress*, *Calamity*, etc. which are unpleasant lexemes would have been used for naming. In other words, it is the intrusion of meaning into the selection of words for naming, which aptly explains why the Christian name-givers prefer such words as *Success*, *Joy*, *Peace*, etc. to words with negative connotations.

In the field of lexicology in particular, the concept of Semantic Prosody provides useful insights into identifying semantic properties of words. Sinclair (1996, p. 87) defines semantic prosody as "evaluative or attitudinal and are used to express the speaker's approval (good prosody) or disapproval (bad prosody) of whatever topic is momentarily the object of discourse". The attitudinal connotations of words could be either positive or negative (Bednarek, 2008, p.132). Following this submission, the semantic prosodic properties of lexemes could be either pleasant (positive prosody) or unpleasant (negative prosody); depending on the aspects of attitudinal meaning the user wants to activate. Using the generativists' concept of binary features and the concept of Semantic Prosody in a lexical analysis such as this, an attempt is made to dissect the syntactic features and semantic properties of the selected words which are used for naming. The next section contains the analysis of the selected data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The study is based on the employment of the generativists' binary features to lexical studies and the concept of Semantic Prosody to analyse the selected data. The textual data garnered for this study are analysed in the table that follows:

Table 2: Syntactic and Semantic Properties of Selected English Lexemes

S/N	Words/Names	Noun	Adjective	Verbs	Adverb	Semantic Prosodic Feature	Gender
1	Abundance	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
2	Amazing	-	+	-	-	Neutral	F
3	Angel	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
4	Anointed	-	(+)	+	-	Neutral	M
5	Beauty	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
6	Beloved	+	+	-	-	Positive	M
7	Best	+	+	+	+	Positive	F
8	Blessing	+	-	+	-	Positive	M/F
9	Blossom	+	-	+	-	Neutral	F

10	Breakthrough	+	-	-	-	Positive	M/F
11	Bright	-	+	-	-	Positive	M
12	Charity	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
13	Christian	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M
14	Comfort	+	-	(+)	-	Positive	F
15	Confidence	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
16	Courage	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M/F
17	Covenant	+	-	(+)	-	Neutral	M
18	Crystal	+	(+)	-	-	Neutral	F
19	Delight	(+)	-	+	-	Neutral	M/F
20	Desire	+	-	+	-	Neutral	M
21	Destiny	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M
22	Diamond	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
23	Divine	+	+	+	-	Neural	M
24	Dominion	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
25	Endurance	+	-	-	-	Neg/Neu	F
26	Excel	-	+	-	-	Positive	M/F
27	Excellence	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
28	Faith	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
29	Faithful	+	+	-	-	Neutral	F
30	Faithfulness	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
31	Favour	+	-	+	-	Positive	M/F
32	Favourite	-	+	-	-	Positive	M/F
33	Flourish	+	-	+	-	Neutral	M/F
34	Fortress	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
35	Fortune	+	-	-	-	Positive	M/F

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						Positive	M
36	Freedom	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
37	Gift	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
38	Glamorous	-	+	-	-	Positive	F
39	Glorious	-	+	-	-	Positive	M/F
40	Glory	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M
41	Godson	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M
42	Godwin	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
43	Gold	+	+	-	-	Positive	M
44	Good	-	+	-	-	Positive	M
45	Goodluck	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
46	Goodness	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
47	Grace	+	-	+	-	Positive	F
48	Gracious	-	+	-	-	Positive	F
49	Great	-	+	-	-	Neutral	M
50	Greatlove	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
51	Happiness	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
52	Harmony	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M
53	Holiness	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M
54	Honey	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
55	Honour	+	-	+	-	Positive	M/F
56	Hope	+	-	+	-	Neutral	M/F
57	Innocent	+	+	-	-	Neutral	M
58	Jewel	+	-	+	-	Positive	F
59	Joy	+	-	+	-	Positive	F
60	Justice	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M
61	King	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M

62	Love	+	-	+	-	Positive	F
63	Loyalty	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
64	Marvellous	-	+	-	-	Neutral	F
65	Melody	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
66	Mercy	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
67	Merry	-	+	-	-	Positive	F
68	Miracle	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M/F
69	Monday	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M
70	Patience	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
71	Peace	+	-	-	-	Positive	M/F
72	Peculiar	-	+	-	-	Neutral	F
73	Perpetual	-	+	-	-	Neutral	M/F
74	Possible	+	+	-	-	Positive	M
75	Praise	+	-	+	-	Positive	F
76	Precious	-	+	-	-	Positive	F
77	Prince	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
78	Princess	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
79	Promise	+	-	+	-	Neutral	M/F
80	Prosper	-	-	+	-	Positive	M
81	Prosperity	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
82	Providence	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
83	Prudence	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
84	Queen	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
85	Rejoice	-	-	+	-	Positive	F
86	Rose	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
89	Royal	+	+	-	-	Neutral	M

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87	Ruby	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
88	Saviour	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
90	Star	+	+	+	-	Positive	M
91	Success	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
92	Sunday	+	-	-	-	Neutral	M
93	Supreme	-	+	-	-	Neutral	M
94	Testimony	+	-	-	-	Neutral	F
95	Treasure	+	-	+	-	Positive	F
96	Triumph	+	-	+	-	Positive	F
97	Trust	+	-	+	-	Positive	F
98	Unique	-	+	-	-	Neutral	F
99	Victor	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
100	Victory	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
101	Virtue	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
102	Wealth	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
103	Winner	+	-	-	-	Positive	F
104	Wisdom	+	-	-	-	Positive	M
105	Wonderful	-	+	-	-	Neutral	M
						Neutral	F

Findings and Discussions

As presented in table 2 above, it is evident that there is a discrepancy of grammatical or syntactic word class among the various words used for naming babies. Although an appreciable number of words used in the naming system are nominal, it is particularly observable that certain words are non-nominal. For instance, such words as *Anointed, Excel, Prosper, and Rejoice* are verbal lexemes (verbs); while such words as *Bright, Glorious, Good, Gracious, Great, Marvellous, Merry, Precious, Peculiar, Perpetual, Supreme, and Wonderful* are adjectives. A group of certain words such as *Anointed, Beloved, Best, Blessing, Comfort, Covenant, Crystal, Delight, Desire, Divine, Favour, Flourish, Gold, Hope, Innocent, Love, Possible, Praise, Promise, Royal, Treasure, Triumph and Trust* have multiple grammatical categories. Since linguists such as Jenkins (2013, p.24), Anderson 2007, p.17) and Pamp (1998, p.252) have argued that names cannot be distinguished from nouns; it is expected therefore that, words used for naming babies should be nominal. Hence, among the Northern Nigerian Christian the observable pattern of naming system involves the employment of the device of function

shift or conversion where non-nominal lexemes function as proper nouns. Therefore, the Nigerian Christian name-givers select words without any recourse to their latent grammatical word classes.

In terms of prosodic features, it is observable that words with positive semantic prosody are predominantly used in naming system; while there is no single word with negative semantic prosody. This is a reflection of a Christian ideology that there is power in positive confession. Thus, the Christian name-givers who used words with positive semantic prosody such as *Blessing, Prosper, Great, Excellence, Flourish, Fortune, Peace, Success*, etc. to christen their babies encode their religious view about life. Thus, the absence of words with negative semantic prosodic feature is a reflection of positive attitudes to life issues.

Similarly, words with seemingly neutral semantic prosodic features such as *Endurance, Patience, Perpetual, Prudence, Princess, Royal, Ruby, Supreme, Testimony, Virtue*, etc. have been re-contextualised to imbibe positive semantic prosody. For instance, in christendom, the word *Testimony* is now commonly used to share some 'negative' experiences which eventually turned 'positive' and brought happiness. Such words are circumstantial names which convey certain socio-cultural background information both about the babies and the name-givers. Thus, if any word has a negative semantic prosody (like *Distress, Sorrow, Grief*, etc.), nobody will name their baby with such a word. Therefore, among the Northern Nigerian Christians the employment of words with positive semantic prosodic features is not only a common naming practice but also a means to encode religious, cultural and philosophical thoughts of the people.

As indicated in table 2 above, words are categorised into three sets according to gender. These are masculine/male gender (M), feminine/female gender (F) and Unisex: male and female (M/F). For instance, some feminine names include *Beauty, Best, Charity, Comfort, Confidence, Endurance, Favour, Gift, Glory, Grace, Gracious, Happiness, Joy, Love, Marvellous, Merry, Mercy, Patience, Peculiar, Precious, Praise, Treasure*, etc. Some masculine names include *Beloved, Bright, Divine, Dominion, Excellence, Goodness, Great, Success*, etc.; while some unisex names include *Blessing, Courage, Delight, Excel, Flourish, Glory, Hope, Peace*, etc. Instances such as these show how name-givers attribute both masculine and feminine gender qualities to neutral words. A philosophical question not within the scope of this study is: what is in the words *Comfort, Glory, Joy, Love*, etc. that motivated the name-givers to attribute feminine quality to them? Conversely, what is in the words *Bright, Divine, Excellence* and *Success* that is not in the words *Glory, Joy, Love*, etc. to have attributed masculinity to them? These are issues that require the attention of sociolinguists, semanticists, especially, onomasiologists.

In discussing the lexical innovations in the selected words, the inventory of a micro number of words is morphologically realised through the process of compounding. For instance, such words include *Godson* (God + son), *Godwin* (God + win), *Goodluck* (good + luck), and *Gratlove* (great + love). Also, such words as *beauty, Best, Comfort, Confidence, Courage, Desire, Endurance, Excellence, Faith, Faithfulness, Favour, Fortune, Glory, Goodness, Grace, Happiness, Holiness, Hope, Innocent, Joy, Love, Mercy, Patience, Praise, Prudence, Success, Victory, Wealth, Wisdom*, etc. are abstract entities. They are words relating to general ideas or qualities rather to specific people. As indicated in table 2 above, such words have been assigned human (physical/concrete) referents because they were used for naming humans. Therefore, those English words have been re-contextualised from common everyday words to proper names.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this study to employ the generativists' notion of binary features and the concept of Semantic Prosody to investigate the syntactic and semantic properties of selected English lexemes used as Christian baby names in the Northern Nigeria. The study has demonstrated that the device of functional shift (word class conversion) was predominantly used for naming. This is evident in how non-nominal lexemes have been deployed by name-givers to name babies. This is discovered that words with positive semantic prosodic feature were used to encode religious, cultural

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and philosophical thoughts of name-givers. Moreover, the analysis has demonstrated that both masculine and feminine gender qualities were attributed to neutral words in Christian naming system. In addition, the study has demonstrated that abstract words were assigned human (concrete) referents. The various findings have established in many ways that the English words that have been used as personal names differ significantly from other elements of linguistic systems. On the basis of these findings, it can be concluded that English words used in Christian naming system have been re-contextualised from common everyday words to proper names, thereby constituting a lexical set or special vocabulary of Christendom in Nigeria.

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