



THE SEMANTIC NATURE OF SUKUMA PERSONAL NAMES

Peter Gongga Shigini

Department of Management,

Faculty of Business and Information Sciences

Moshi Co-operative University (MoCU), Moshi-Kilimanjaro - Tanzania

E-mail: peter.gonga@mocu.ac.tz; shiginipeter@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aimed at providing a description of the content embodied in Sukuma names that parents give to their children. Two theories namely: the Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1997) and the Agenda-setting Theory by McCombs and Shaw (1972) formed the theoretical framework of this study. The corpus of this study was 30 Sukuma personal names obtained through a series of phone calls between the researcher and five Sukuma native old men. In analysing the data and providing a description of the meanings embodied in names given to children of Sukuma origin, the study uses Discourse Analysis (DA) method. The findings reveal that some of the names given to children are loaded with contents reflecting experiences of parents prior to or during pregnancy and even at birth. The conclusion shows that names are meaning potentials; and in assigning names to their children, parents bear in mind a purpose which may be influenced by some good or bad life experiences. It is recommended that parents should think very careful when assigning names to their children as a means to tell their stories which may no longer be relevant to the referent later on in life.

Keywords: Names; Personal names; Kisukuma; Naming practices; Semantic content

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kisukuma is one of the languages of Bantu speaking people in Tanzania. The language is derived from the word 'Sukuma' which means 'north'. Its speakers are famously known as Basukuma (plural) or Msukuma (singular) meaning people or a person from north. The Sukuma or Basukuma are the largest ethnic group in Tanzania. Geographically, the Kisukuma speaking people are located in the North West Tanzania, particularly in the administrative regions of Mwanza, Shinyanga, Geita, Simiyu and some parts of Tabora. However, the Sukuma speaking people can be found in almost all regions in Tanzania due to their mobility. The exact number of Sukuma speaking people is not easy to tell but Muzale and Rugemalira (2008) provided an approximate of 5,194,553 Sukuma native speakers. Kisukuma is a Bantu language which is composed of four dialects: Jinasukuma, Jinakiiya, Jinang'weeli and Jinadakama which are easily mutually intelligible even in terms of names given to children.

The word name is often used to mean a term which can refer to anything (Bright, 2003), like when someone says 'Mango' meaning the name of a fruit, 'Corruption' meaning the name of a crime. Based on this sense, therefore, the word name is basically synonymous with the word noun. Names in any given society are very essential though few people ever pause to reflect on their cultural, social and political significance and what they reveal about people's way of life. The experience of a parent prior to or during pregnancy leads to children being given names which are loaded with meaning (Njanji & Muromo, 2013). Moreover, Bright (2003) noted that a person may be called by different names at different periods of life, or by different people under changing conditions. This means that at birth a person may be named a different name by the parents but in the course of life receives different names depending on his or her behaviour. Personal names occur in any language and they form a special group within the vocabulary of a language (Al-Zumor, 2009); they are the most meaningful lexicon in the vocabulary of any language and an important part of language inventory (Mphande, 2006). The personal names (though not all) in Kisukuma bear special semantic contents. Lusekelo (2018) stated that the semantic content of the name for a

new born is determined by the nature of relationships within a family and clan, events during the pregnancy, physical environment of birth or birth place, as well as any other happening that ensued. People in general and the Sukuma in particular have long been known to have special ways of communicating their state of sorrow, joy and many other feelings using names.

The Holy Bible demonstrates that the practice of naming people (and even things) existed since the time of creation (see Genesis 1:1-31). The naming practice occurred even to the people who were selected by God to serve him and the names given to those people had their meaning to their bearers' lives. For instance, Exodus 2:10 shows that Moses was given that name because his mother drew him out of a river and the name 'Moses' literary means 'to draw out'. The books of Genesis 25:6 and 1Samuel 1:20 indicate that some given personal names depict the persons' birth as it happened to Jacob, Moses and Samuel. In addition, some of the names express the parents' response to the birth of their beloved children. In the book of Genesis 21:6, for example, the name 'Isaac' which literally means 'laughter' was given to the child as a reflection of the parents' reaction to God. Furthermore, the Bible shows that names also were used to express the nature and purpose of a person or to explain reasons behind the birth of a person. For instance, Mathew 1:20-21 explain about the birth of a child called Jesus. The name Jesus tells clearly the purpose of the referent, which literally means 'saviour, redeemer or rescuer'. Thus, it is very evident that the purpose of Jesus in the world was and/or is to save people from their burdens of sins.

In naming in Africa, almost all African names given to newly born children are meaningful (Mbiti, 1969). Igboin (2014) posits that the meanings of names are tied largely, on many occasions, to the circumstances of birth of the child; and to a large extent, these names influence the personality and character of the bearer, thus his or her identity. Naming practices are cherished in African communities and the personal names bestowed to children are used to carry some semantic content usually determined by circumstances at birth (Lusekelo & Muro, 2018). Naming is a specific linguistic act, intimately linked with values, traditions, hopes, fears and events in people's lives. Names reveal the many preferences of their owners (or givers) in terms of real life objects, actions, features and beliefs (Rosenhouse, 2002). Personal naming practices provide important insights into the patterns of social and cultural organisation of communities and can be a key to broader cultural changes (Al-Zumor, 2009). Al-Zumor adds that names inform us about the categorisation of the new-born infant and the name-giver, and often tell us what is seen as significant about the background and the circumstances at the time of birth.

Names exist as part of the sociolinguistic setting; they are part of every society that gives them and act as a window through which the world is understood and appreciated (Mutunda 2016). Through names, members of a community can express their experiences, feelings, joys or even sorrows. Olawale (2005) noted that, in Africa, there is so much meaning in a name; if a child is given the right name, he or she starts off with certain indefinable but very real advantages. Based on Musonda, Ngalande and Simwinga (2019), giving names among the Bantu cultures reflects the sociocultural circumstances of the group and/ or clan. Mashiri, Chabata and Chitando (2013) assert that naming in African societies often reflects sociocultural and ideological realities of these societies. Koopman (1990) concluded that name givers and bearers of names are aware of the meaning of the name, and the literal meaning of the name is always directly related to the reason for giving it.

The system of naming people and other things is significant because names are an important source of different information. They can indicate gender, marital status, birthplace, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and position within a family or even within a society (Anonymous, 2006). Moreover, names not only name the environment, but also store the distinctions about the fauna and flora (Mphande, 2006). However, naming practices vary greatly; all societies worldwide have their own ways of naming things and people based on interplay of factors. Mphande (2006) noted that naming depends on a particular culture from which they are framed. A name in many African cultures (and elsewhere) tells a lot about the individual and it signifies the language and society from which it is drawn. Moreover, a name may show the position of the name's bearer in the society, and the collective history and life experiences of the people surrounding the individual. The giving of names to newly born children and other things is influenced by many social, political, economic, cultural, environmental, historical and religious factors. Bailey (2010) explains that human names, in ancient Africa, were something living and carried from God the power of continuing existence. Personal names and names-giving practices vary from one culture to another. Some

parents name their children after someone special usually a relative who has or had a close relationship with the family.

As mentioned earlier, names tell stories about parents, families and life in general. Njanji and Muromo (2013) observed that proper names serve a lot of purposes, not only as reference devices but also for social and interactional purposes as this study portrays. Furthermore, names come in a number of categories such as place, personal, ethnic, landscape features, names of route-ways as well as names of social groups just to mention but a few. This study is, therefore, based on Onomastics¹ which has two branches: anthropomastics and topomastics. Anthropomastics deals with the study of personal names while topomastics is dedicated to study place names (Ennin and Nkansah, 2016). Within the general category of names, people often use the word name for what can more precisely be called proper names (Bright, 2003). Studies done in this area are numerous; they include Harrison (n.d.), Pongweni (1983), Kimenyi (1989), Moyo (1996), Mphande (2006), Koopman (1990, 2002), Bright (2003), Mapara, Nyota and Mutasa (2005), Pfukwa (2003, 2008), Njanji and Muromo (2013), Mutema and Njanji (2013), Igboin (2014), Mwangi (2015), Mutunda (2016), Wekjira (2019), Udu (2019), Mutegi, Nabea and Gwachi (2017), Azieb and Qudah (2018) as well as Musonda et al. (2019). However, most of these studies have tended to concentrate on investigating the naming practices and the motivational forces behind parents assigning personal names to their children in African societies, while studies into the meaning captured in African personal names, particularly Sukuma, remain scanty and limited. This study is an attempt to fill this gap in literature by providing a description of the semantic contents of Sukuma personal names.

Behind the naming of children, parents normally have a purpose in their minds. Mapara et al. (2005) reveal that some people's character traits are captured in the names they carry. In their study, Njanji and Muromo (2013) organised personal names into a number of categories such as those that show: behaviour or characteristics; general life problems; an event in the family; names that denote success or failure; and national or world events. In this paper, a similar categorisation is adopted, with an addition of a category of names that denote time or season; to describe the names given to children whose parents are Sukuma speakers. The names taken on board, in this paper, are those that are typical of Sukuma origin (native names) leaving out any Christian or Islamic and European names. This is based on the fact that the current generation seems to revolt against the traditional (native) names under the influence of communication with other worlds through media, travelling, and reading about the culture of other nations (Al-Zumor, 2009).

In providing a description of the semantic nature of Sukuma personal names, two theories form the framework of this study. These are the Social Learning theory by Albert Bandura (1997) and the Agenda-setting theory by McCombs and Shaw (1972). Bandura (1997) in his theory of social learning emphasized on what is famously called observational learning. His argument being that people learn new things by observing their environment, times in which they are living. Similarly, parents come up with new names through observing their environment or the times in which they are living. Parents, through watching other people, learn new behaviours and information which get reflected by the names they assign to their children. Moreover, McCombs and Shaw (1972) propounded a theory known as 'Agenda-setting theory' which focussed on addressing the role of mass media during political campaigns. They argued that, in reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues – that is, the media may set the agenda of the campaign. Though this was not meant to address linguistic issues, it still provides some fruitful contribution to this study. Parents do not just assign names of any kind to their beloved children but rather they do so for a specific purpose or to set an agenda either for the referents (children) or for the society in which they live; and such names are loaded with semantic contents. Parents, therefore, assign names to their children to make and/or show a particular stance. These two theories provide an insight in understanding key issues behind the naming of children not only in Sukuma language but also in other languages.

Personal names among Africans serve as a communication tool and storehouse for the culture and history of the society. However, many people are ignorant of the semantic contents captured in their personal names. Every personal name given to a child at any given stage in life has meaning. African societies (Sukuma included) are

¹Onomastics is the study of proper names (place and personal names).

known to use personal names as a way of conveying the cultural values and traditions of their daily experiences. Historically, personal names were used as a way of documenting important events or life experiences. This paper aims at providing a description of the content embodied in Sukuma personal names that parents give to their children. It also informs the name users or parents about making good choices of names as well as enabling them engage in the naming practices with better knowledge. Due to the fact that personal names in Sukuma language are many and cannot all be covered just within this study, the paper is therefore, not meant to be exhaustive rather than a step towards understanding what content is carried by names in the Sukuma language and culture. Moreover, the names considered for discussion in this research are only those that serve the purpose of the study: providing a description of the content embodied in Sukuma personal names. The naming practices in Sukuma are mostly determined by the circumstances at birth; so the names given are a reflection of such circumstances.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is largely a semantics analysis of the Sukuma personal names by bringing to the reader's attention the semantic contents captured in the Sukuma personal names. Mouton (2001) noted that the research design is a blueprint of how one intends to conduct research and the direction it will take. This study is essentially qualitative in nature; and used a qualitative approach as it is situated within the interpretative paradigm. In analyzing the data and providing a description of the meanings embodied in names given to children of Sukuma origin, the study uses Discourse Analysis (DA) method – which involves the study of naturally occurring language in the context, in which it is used. Stubbs (1983) defined discourse analysis as: (1) concerned with language use beyond the boundaries of a sentence/utterance, (2) concerned with the interrelationships between language and society, and (3) as concerned with the interactive or dialogic properties of everyday communication. This paper analyzes 30 Sukuma personal names which form the corpus. Purposeful sampling was employed to obtain the names that fit well into this study's focus. The names were obtained through a series of phone calls between the researcher and five old men who live in the interior (Nyika village) of Shinyanga region and who are native speakers of Sukuma language. The interviewees were purposeful and conveniently selected on the basis of their knowledge of the language by virtue of being native speakers of Kisukuma. The researcher acknowledges the presence of many other old men who are native speakers of Kisukuma and therefore possess the same language knowledge just like interviewed ones and could have provided the same data required. Moreover, based on the fact that this study is qualitative in nature and it is not meant to make generalisations, five interviewees sufficed the provision of data for this study. During the interview conversations the researcher was interested to know the reasons surrounding the giving of some names to children in Sukuma and their subsequent meanings.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research's findings on names reveal some purposes behind parents' naming of their children. Njanji and Muromo (2013) observe that when people (parents) in a marriage relationship want to communicate something, they do it through the names they give to their children. For instance, if a woman was impregnated by someone who then refused to take responsibility, the name given to the child can say it all and when a couple loses a child then the next one can be named to remind people of their loss. Additionally, an analysis of these names shows how parents relive their memorable past through naming their children or do the same to remember idols². However, names are not solutions to problems communicated by them but rather a way of keeping parents' records and describing the circumstance at birth.

3.1 Names denoting general life problems

According to Njanji and Muromo (2013), the giving of names to children has become a channel through which parents express their sentiments irrespective of the feelings evoked in the children or the impact the names have on the children. Hlahla (2012) has raised a social criticism which urged parents to 'stop burdening their children with weird names.' Hlahla goes on to assert that if parents stopped to think before burdening their children with 'talking names', it would serve a lot of people some embarrassment and hurt. For instance, *Bugumba/Ng'wipagi* means bareness or prolonged childless bearing. Sometimes couples after having one or two children and still having a desire to have more children, they experience a prolonged childless bearing moment or wait for a long time before having one. The name is usually given to both male and female children. Furthermore,

² Idols are famous personalities being emulated.

Salu/Malongo/Njile/Majahasi denotes events related to death. *Malongo* and *Salu* all mean soil, sand or meant to die; while *Njile* means 'meant to disappear or die.' Parents give these names to children whose births are preceded by the deaths of the first two or more children. Normally, parents give these names to their newly born children expecting similar occurrences, that is, they believe that even the newly born children will as well die like their predecessors. The names *Salu*, *Malongo* and *Majahasi* (as seen in Table 1) are given to male children whereas *Njile* is given to female children.

Table 1: Names denoting general life problems

Names	Semantic content	Situation/circumstance at birth
Bugumba/Gumba	'bareness' or 'barrenness'	Prolonged childlessness moment
Masalu	'sand' or 'soil'	Preceded by death of other children
Malongo	'sand' or 'soil'	Preceded by death of other children
Njile	'meant to disappear' or 'die'	Preceded by death of other children
Majahasi	'meant to be buried'	Preceded by death of other children

3.2 Names denoting certain events in the family

As Njanji and Muromo (2013) point out, names are material entities that are capable of assuming lives and voices of their own. In the Sukuma culture, parents may decide to name a child a particular name only for that name to stick or to indicate certain events in a given family. *Kwangu* is a female name denoting that the named is the last born in the family or the closing entity in the family. It simply means the last born. *Kalekwa* means 'the abandoned one'. It is a female name given to the one who after birth is abandoned or whose mother dies soon after giving birth leaving the child under the care of its father, relatives or guardian. Moreover, *Masanja* denotes 'union', 'coming together' or 'unification.' It is normally a name given to a male child born at the time or day of unification between people, families or clans on a particular matter. In addition, *Geni/Mageni* means non-native or guest to a place. It is a name given to a female/male child born while its parents were away from their usual home place (village). Female children are called *Geni* whereas male children are named *Mageni* respectively. Furthermore, a child born (normally a male) at the time the parents were going through some sorts of life hardships or faced with problems/disasters is given the name *Makoye/Mayanga*. This name denotes problems, troubles, hardships or disasters. The name denotes circumstances surrounding his birth, trouble over pregnancy for starters followed by other troubles after birth.

Table 2: Names denoting certain events in the family

Names	Semantic content	Situation/circumstance at birth
Mayanga/Makoye	'problems/sufferings'	Disaster or death
Kalekwa	'abandoned/dumped'	During or at birth
Masanja	'meetings/unifications'	During or at birth
Geni	'guest or foreign to a place'	Vacation
Masumbuko	'sufferings or hardships'	During sufferings or hard times
Shida	'problem'	During problems or hard times

3.3 Names denoting success or failure

Parents use names to express family status in terms of economy and to show the great love and ambitions they have for their children (Wekjira, 2019). The names in Table 3 are given to children to communicate success. They tell information about the wellbeing or economic status of the family or parents by the time they got a child. Sometimes, these names are given to children with their parents having imaginations of how successful in life their children would become when they grow up. In the same vein, Koopman (2002) argues that normally names refer to the state of the mind of the parents or close relatives during the time of birth such as pride, love feelings, sadness or happiness. Names like *Nkwabi* and *Nsabi* reveal success or prosperity. *Nkwabi* is a name given to a male child born at the times parents experienced economic success. Similarly, *Nsabi* means 'a rich person' or 'meant to be rich'. Moreover, *Kang'wa* denotes 'the hare', 'clever or intelligent.' It is given to female children who are envisioned to be clever or intelligent like the hare, and therefore, likely to be successful in life. *Mabuki* denotes 'abundant honey' and is given to a male child born at the time of abundant food supply in the family. These names are given with an intention of shaping or channelling the child's life towards prosperity or success.

Table 3: Names denoting success or failure

Names	Semantic content	Situation/circumstance at birth
Nkwabi	'property gatherer/economist'	Economic prosperity or success
Nsabi	'rich person' or 'boss'	Economic prosperity or success
Kang'wa	'rabbit', 'clever' or 'intelligent'	Predicting future success
Mabuki	'abundant honey'	Abundant food productions

3.4 Names denoting national or world events

A nation and the world in general may go through a series of memorable events at different times, whereby some events are good while others are bad and painful for people to bear. Events related to hunger and starvation, high and/or destructive rainfall (El Nino), droughts, wars and social unrest, abundant agricultural production, deadly pandemics and so forth. Parents in accordance with the ongoing events in the nation and in the world generally; have the naming of their children influenced by such events. *Mayala/Nyanzala* indicates hunger or starvation. It is therefore a name that reveals its bearer was born at the time the family or nation was experiencing serious hunger or starvation. *Mayala* is for male children and *Nyanzala* is for female children. Furthermore, the name *Mabula/Kabula* indicates that the bearer was born during heavy rainfall or rain season. The name itself is derived from the word 'mbula' which simply means rain. *Mabula* refers to male children whereas *Kabula* refers to the female children (see Table 4).

Table 4: Names denoting national or world events

Names	Semantic content	Situation/circumstance at birth
Mayala	'hunger or starvation'	Shortage or lack of food
Nyanzala	'hunger or starvation'	Shortage or lack of food
Mabula	'rain or heavy rains'	Heavy rainy season
Kabula	'rain or little rain'	Rainy season

3.5 Names denoting time of the day or season

Parents may give a name to their child to indicate the time of the day that particular child was born. They do so to memorize the problems or experience of that very time of the day. The name can also serve as a testimony of the good or bad experience parents had during birth. *Malemi/Lemi* is the (male/female respectively) name that indicates or means 'during the day time or the sunny time.' In most cases, the Sukuma speakers use the name to mean 'during lunch time.' So it is a name given to a child born during lunch hours. The name also implies that there is light ahead within the family. Moreover, the name *Bhujiku/Njiku*, (male/female) means 'at night' or 'during the night.' The name is specifically assigned to children born during the night. Similarly, the name *Giiti* which means darkness; it denotes the male child whose birth took place at night but with intense darkness. It also signifies the dark moments the family passed through before the child was born. In addition, the name *Mhindi* is applicable to either sex though primarily a female and it means 'evening/during the evening.' This means that the bearer was born in the evening just before sun set (Table 5).

Table 5: Names denoting time of the day or season

Names	Semantic content	Situation/circumstance at birth
Malimi	'the sun' or 'in the afternoon'	During the sunny time/day time
Limi	'the sun'	During the sunny time/day time
Giiti	'dark' or 'darkness'	At night or in the dark
Njiku/Bujiku	'the night' or 'the darkness'	At night or in the dark

3.6 Names denoting behaviours, characteristics or order of birth

In the Sukuma language, the names that fall into this category are those that indicate the manner the child was born, position in the family among children (issue number) or biological development stage of the newly born child. As in Table 6, the name *Kashinje*, for example, denotes the manner that surrounded the child's birth. Particularly it means abnormal or contrary to the known norm. It is the norm that children are born with the head coming first; but it is abnormal (unusual) for a child to be born bottom first instead of head first (breech). So

Kashinje in Kisukuma denotes a child whose birth was contrary to the norm, that is, a breech child. The name is given to both male and female children. *Kulwa* and *Dotto* (also common in Swahili and other Bantu languages) are names given to twins of either sex with the one preceding the other being called *Kulwa* and the following one is called *Dotto*. Moreover, by observing position or rank the name *Shija/Mhoja* is given to a child (of either sex) whose birth is preceded by twins, and *Kasanda* is the third child (born) after twins and it is normally given to male children. Furthermore, by considering the biological development stage of the newly born child at the time of birth; *Ndebile/Biisi* denotes immaturity, unripe or incomplete. It is the name given to a child (*Ndebile* for males and *Biisi* for females) born prematurely. In Swahili such kind of a child is famously called *Njiti*.

Table 6: Names denoting behaviour, characteristics or order of birth

Names	Semantic content	Situation/circumstance at birth
Kashinje	'abnormal/opposite'	Legs/bottom preceding the head
Kulwa/Dotto	'twin children'	Born the same time/day by same mother
Shija/Mhoja	'preceded by twins'	Born after or next to twins
Ndebile/Biisi	'incomplete/premature'	At birth
Kasanda	'third born after twins'	Coming third after twins

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed at providing a description of the semantic content embodied in names bestowed to children among the Sukuma speaking people of North-western regions of Tanzania. The study has shown that names are meaning potentials; and that in assigning names to their children, parents bear in their minds a purpose. The purpose for assigning a particular name to a particular child may be influenced by some good or bad life experiences. The names given to children communicate information related to parents' state of mind and attitude during birth. Some children when they mature try to change their names as they feel embarrassed and they do not share the same experience to that of their parents. Furthermore, based on spiritual views, names have significant impacts on their bearers, for instance, the Swahili names *Tabu*, *Shida*, *Mateso*, *Sikustahili* and *Masumbuko* denote hardships, problems, disasters, sufferings, etc. The bearers of such names may encounter drawbacks and sufferings in life no matter how hard they struggle. Names are not mere language lexicons; they carry in them spiritual powers which have implications in the lives of their referents. It has been observed that, when a newly born child is given the right name, he or she starts off with certain indefinable but very real advantages. Since the naming practices may be influenced by some parents' good or bad life experiences (all of which have spiritual implications) and that the bearers of the assigned names may encounter drawbacks, sufferings or success in their lives, it is recommended that parents should be very keen when choosing names to assign to their newly born children; they should carefully think before naming a child to tell their stories which may no longer be relevant to the referent later on in life.

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