PROPER NAMES IN LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY IN SOUTH AFRICA: NOTES ON TOPONYMS IN LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

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1. BACKGROUND

Toponyms may be stated to have interlinguistic validity. Often the same toponyms are used in different languages, albeit in phonologically and morphologically adapted form. In a number of instances it may no longer be immediately obvious from which language the name originally derived. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that most toponyms were initially language-specific, that they originated in a particular language, or in more than one language.

South African toponyms reflect a wide range of languages. The earliest names bestowed on geographical features were of Khoekhoen (Hottentot) and San (Bushman) origin.

From the latter part of the fifteenth century, coastal features were named by Portuguese, Dutch and English mariners. The second half of the seventeeth century saw the start of colonization and the opening up of the interior. Dutch, French and German settlers gradually inhabited the country. The British occupation of the Cape in 1795 and again in 1806, and the arrival of the British settlers of 1820, caused a proliferation of place-names of English origin. The discovery of gold and diamonds caused an influx of immigrants, leading to a more cosmopolitan population and the subsequent bestowal of place-names from many languages.

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However, toponyms from English and Afrikaans, the two official languages of the country, preponderate.

The third major group of toponyms comprises those of Bantu origin. There are four main Bantu language groups, namely Nguni, Sotho, Tsonga and Venda. With the exception of Venda, each of these language groups may be subdivided into a number of smaller language clusters, most of which consist of a number of closely related dialects. The Nguni group consists of twelve such language clusters, the Sotho group of eleven, and the Tsonga group of four.

Within this complex situation there are eight officially recognized languages, namely Zulu, Xhosa and Swazi from the Nguni group; Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, and Tswana from the Sotho group; Tsonga and Venda.

2.   TOPONYMS IN LANGUAGE

2.1 *Khoekhoen languages*

Toponyms derived from the various European languages are grammatically structured largely according to the paradigm of the languages of the mother countries. Language contact in toponyms between these languages and the indigenous languages is reflected in translations, adaptations and hybridizations. The confines imposed by a paper of this nature preclude a detailed discussion of these aspects. My remarks will therefore mainly be limited to toponyms of Khoekhoen and Bantu origin.

The Khoekhoen languages have fallen into disuse within the Republic of South Africa, while Nama is the only one surviving in South West Africa/Namibia. However, toponyms originating in the Khoekhoen languages occur in large numbers throughout South-West Africa/Namibia, the western and southern portions of the Cape Province, and in the Orange Free State.

The Khoekhoen languages are characterized by clicks or suction consonants. In the past up to eight of these clicks were distinguished; in standardized usage today, four are employed. They are the dental suction consonant, represented in writing as /; the palatal click, represented as ≠; the lateral, as //, and the cerebral, as !. These suction consonants are, or may be, semantically determinative. Thus words which are written in precisely the same manner, but with different clicks, have different meanings. These suction consonants are omitted from toponyms but are relevant to common nouns and other elements comprising these toponyms.

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The aspect of pitch, which also determines the meaning of Khoekhoen words, will be ignored for the purposes of this paper.

Most Khoekhoen substantives in the singular end in -b/-p, for example *heib*, 'stick'; in -s, for example *heis*, 'tree', or in -i, for example *xami*, 'lion'. Those which end in -b or -p are felt to be masculine, and those ending in -s as feminine, although the Khoekhoen notion of gender does not correspond exactly with that in European languages.

Many Khoekhoen toponyms, too, take final -b/-p or -s. Rivers, streams, mountains and the like are regarded as being masculine; pools, ravines, round hills and so forth are regarded as feminine, and their names are marked accordingly. Compare */Hai!garib*, 'Grey river'; *=Numus*, 'Black eye', i.e. 'Black pool'.

Besides denoting gender, these final consonants also act as locative markers, for example *!Nawab*, '(Place of the) rhinoceros'; */Nomas*, '(Place of the) wild fig tree'. In such instances there is no formal difference between the toponym and its homophonous substantive, except for the omission of the suction consonants in the case of the former.

In prefinal position, immediately preceding the abovementioned markers, particular locative morphemes sometimes occur in Khoekhoen toponyms, namely -be-/-bi-, -re-/-ri-, -se-/-si-, -te-/-ti-, or their variants -bee-/-bie-, -ree-/-rie-, -tee-/-tie-, -see-/-sie-, and the like. Examples are *Nomabeb*, 'Place of the fig-tree', *Eisees*, 'Beautiful place', *Nababeep*, 'Rhinoceros place', et cetera.

A particularly prevalent component of Khoekhoen toponyms is the morpheme indicating abundance, namely -xa-, also often encountered in the spellings -ga- and -cha-. It occurs in the final position (*Aga*), in the prefinal one (*Achab*), before the locative morpheme (*Abuchabis*), before the second component of a compound toponym (*Aechaaub*), but apparently never in the initial position.

As is the case in many other languages, most Khoekhoen toponyms are compounds. In many instances they consist of a generic term indicating the nature of the feature to which the name refers, and a specific term which describes or qualifies it. Examples are *Gouib*, 'Pointed rock', *Nuaub*, 'Black spring' and so forth. An analysis of the lexical meaning of these components indicates that the majority of generic terms are based on the presence of water, elevations and depressions, the geological structure, and delimitations and demarcations.

2.2 *Bantu languages*

Three categories of locative markers may be distinguished in the Bantu languages, namely prefixes, suffixes and particles. A primary suffix seems to be -ini which can occur as -eni in the Nguni languages (e.g. *Entabeni*) and as -ng (e.g. *Taung*) in Northern Sotho, or as -ene in some other Sotho dialects.

This suffix occurs only in words which do not have an embedded locative. The Northern Sotho name for Johannesburg, *Gauteng*, takes the locative suffix -ng because the word from which it is derived, namely the Afrikaans word goud ('gold'), has no embedded locative aspect. *Gauteng* thus means 'At (or in) the gold'. Those toponyms which have embedded locative aspects, however, do not take the suffix -ng, for example *Tshwane*, which is a Sotho place-name.

The locative suffix is always encountered in the final position. It may, however, be preceded by, for example, a diminutive suffix.

Another important locative morpheme is the prefix. In the Nguni languages and some others, but not in the Sotho language, a pre-prefix is also encountered, namely e-, as in *eDolobeni*, 'in town'.

In the Nguni languages the most prevalent prefixes and particles are e-, ka-, ku- and kwa-; in the Sotho languages, ga- and mo-; in Tsonga, eKa- and kwa-, and in Venda, ha-. These locative prefixes and particles can convey senses such as 'at', 'in', 'into', 'inside', 'bordering on', and so forth.

According to the official orthographies of the various languages, a variety of possibilities of styling is encountered with respect to the prefixes and particles:

Sotho Ga- is hyphenated, e.g. *Ga-Rankuwa*.

Venda Ha- is affixed to the personal name, e.g. *Hamasia*.

Tsonga eKa- is written separately from the ensuing personal name, e.g. *eKa Mhinga*.

Tswana kwa-, which may be prefixed to toponyms, has been omitted in the official list of place-names.

Nguni kwa- and ku- are affixed to the following element of the name and are written with an inital lower-case letter,

while the following element has an upper-case letter,
e.g. kwaMashu,

kuVuyane. At the start of a sentence or when the toponym
occurs in a non-syntactic context, the initial k- is
written upper-case.

Nguni locative e- and o- are affixed to the ensuing element.
The initial letter of this element is written as a capital
in the grammatical subject form, or 'where a place name
merely indicates a locality' (*Official Place Names ...,*
1978, p. 83), compare *eDulini, eThekwini.* Where such names
have become Europeanized, they are written with an initial
capital e.g. *Empangeni* and *Otobotini.*

As in most languages, toponyms in the Bantu languages may consist
of a generic and a specific term. Even in such instances there
is no uniformity in the styling. For example, *Thabatshweu*
('White Mountain') is one word in Nguni, while *Thaba ya maru*
('Mountain of Clouds') is written as three. This may be
explained by regarding *Thabatshweu* as a contraction, and *Thaba
ya maru* as an unabbreviated syntactic structure. Sotho names
containing the element Thaba are written as two words, e.g.
Thaba Nchu ('Mountain of the Night').

The diversity of rules appertaining to the correct styling of
toponyms in the various Bantu languages sometimes causes con-
fusion to those unacquainted with the languages. Cartographers,
administrators, compilers of gazetteers and others cannot
comfortably write a toponym without double-checking. Even
strict adherence to the rules is not always a guarantee of
infallibility. *Empangeni* and *eMpembeni* are both Nguni names
with precisely the same structure, yet they are styled
differently. ·

This problem is receiving attention, however. The National
Place Names Committee, which is the highest advisory body on the
standardization of toponyms, has instructed a sub-committee to
investigate the situation and to make recommendations on how to
solve the problems.

3. TOPONYMS IN SOCIETY

3.1 Toponyms as social barometer

Names are used to identify specific entities and to distinguish
them from other entities. Besides being applied to all manner
of geographical features, names denote cities, towns, suburbs,
streets, squares, buildings, parks, and so forth.

Since each new entity generally receives a new name, there are
constant opportunities for onomastic activity. Most toponyms are
bestowed on an official level and received on an unofficial one,
for example by the people who inhabit the locality and use the
name. Certain toponyms may elicit positive or negative
reactions. When names from the Bantu languages were sought for
townships, the authorities wished to bestow positive ones. Names
such as *Ikageng*, 'Improve yourselves', 'Build yourselves up',
were given. Among a large section of the population, however,
these names are seen as being commands, in the imperative mood.
The study of the reception of toponyms may therefore be of value
in anticipating and avoiding names and name forms which could
cause offence.

In addition to officially bestowed names, unofficial ones come
into being, sometimes for already named entities. In some
instances these unofficial names are never documented but are
employed orally among the inhabitants or others closely connected
with the places. A study of such 'idionyms' is very revealing
of attitudes and emotions and reflects acceptance, resignation,
antagonism, aggression, satisfaction or whatever the case may be,
towards the entity which bears the name and in the eyes of the
users. Such investigations into the sociological and psycho-
logical aspects of names are invaluable from the point of view
of human relations and the improvement of the socio-economic
conditions of the population.

Toponyms may also be indicative of a social dichotomy or
polarization. Thus, for example, different language groups have
their own names for the same entity. *Johannesburg* is *Gauteng*
in Northern Sotho and *eGoli* in Southern Sotho, the latter name
derived from the word 'gold'. *Durban* is *eThekwini*, 'At the
lagoon', in Zulu; *Pretoria* is *Tshwane* in Northern Sotho, and
iTswane in Xhosa. Cognizance is taken of this situation on an
official level. On railway-station markers, for example,
provision is made also for the Bantu names and the weather
forecast map on television indicates the different Bantu names
on Bantu-language channels.

3.2 *Toponyms and language contact*

In a country with such a heterogeneous population as South Africa
has, language contact is inevitably reflected in its toponyms.
Side by side, names from all of the languages spoken in the
country occur. Furthermore, partial and complete translations
are encountered, such as *Cape Town/Kaapstad*, *Houtbaai/Hout Bay*,
etc., as well as hybrid forms in which one element, generally
the specific, is in an autochthonous language and the other,
usually the generic, is in different language. Examples are

Cheridouws Poort (Khoekhoen and Afrikaans in English styling), *Knysna East* (Khoekhoen and English), *Umgeni Mouth* (Zulu and English), and so forth. Furthermore, phonological and morphological adaptations occur when names from one language are used in another. This holds true for all extant languages. In the above-mentioned names, for example, *Cheridouws* is adapted from *Tsoaridaos*, 'The hindermost pass or poort', the element *Poort* being tautological. Similarly, *Umgeni* is adapted from *uMgeni* or *Mgeni*.

Adaptation of toponyms from the Bantu languages in Afrikaans and English, and vice versa, is common.

To my knowledge there are no instances of Bantu toponyms taken over into Khoekhoen, the reason being that the Khoekhoen themselves were absorbed *inter alios* by the Bantu-speaking peoples with whom they came into contact, notably the Xhosa in the south-east and the Tswana in the north-west, and the Khoekhoen languages died out. However, Khoekhoen influence on the Bantu languages and toponymy is considerable. The suction consonants in the Nguni languages are from Khoekhoen, and a large number of Xhosa toponyms have been shown to be of Khoekhoen origin, e.g. *Bulura, Kasuka, Kinira, Komga, Kwelera, Qora* and so forth.

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