

Interlinguistic contact in onomastics in South Africa

by P.E. Raper

1. INTRODUCTION

The Khoisan Place Names of South Africa, i.e. those of Bushman and Hottentot origin, are among the oldest in the world. South African place names of European origin, on the other hand, are of comparatively recent origin, while names in South Africa bestowed by the Bantu peoples date from the 18th century. At first glance, one may be tempted to assume that place names in South Africa would be relatively simple, but in actual fact her place names reflect an astonishing measure of complexity as a result of interlinguistic contact. To the best of my knowledge, no country in the world has a more heterogeneous population. Apart from the two official languages, English and Afrikaans, there are seven officially recognized written Bantu languages, namely Tsonga, Zulu, Xhosa, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Venda and Tswana. Place names have been given by all these peoples, as well as by the Khoisan peoples, the Bushmen and Hottentots. It must be borne in mind that dialects of each of the Bantu and Khoisan languages occur, which further complicates matters.

Place names bestowed by Europeans or whites are no less complex. Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, Germans and Afrikaners all at one time or another bestowed place names in South Africa and a glance at these names reflects interlinguistic contact. As may be expected, interlinguistic contact in onomastics is not restricted to any racial group – we find Khoisan names corrupted by both Bantu and whites; Bantu names corrupted by whites; names of European origin corrupted by Bantu; Dutch and Afrikaans names reflect English influence; English names reflect corruption by Afrikaans, and all manner of hybrid forms occur.

As regards personal names, interlinguistic contact has hitherto played a far smaller role than in the case of place names. Khoisan names are unknown among white or Bantu and I have not encountered a single case of Bantu names having been adopted by whites, even in corrupted or hybridized form. On the other hand, European personal names are very often found among Bantu. In some cases, Bantu have only first names of European origin; in others, European first names which they use among Europeans,

and parallel Bantu names which they use among their own people. As far as I have been able to ascertain, Bantu have not adopted European surnames. The Coloured people, however, having originated as a result of miscegenation between whites and Bantu, seem to be more closely allied to the whites, and have first names and surnames of white – usually Afrikaans – origin. Naturally this does not apply in all cases.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is interesting to trace briefly the progress of settlement by the various races and groups which in the past inhabited and today still inhabit South Africa.

The first people to come to South Africa were the Bushmen. We can no longer ascertain the time of their arrival or even from whence they came. At one time they were to be found over almost the entire country, but at present they are confined mainly to the Central and Northern Kalahari Desert and the adjoining areas.

The Hottentots seem to have come originally from Northern Africa. While travelling southwards, they were cut off from the main body. Having reached the southernmost tip of Africa, they migrated eastwards until, almost at the borders of the present Natal, they encountered the Bantu who were moving southwards. Perhaps centuries later, the Hottentots, in remnants of broken tribes, with a considerable amount of mixed blood, were driven back by the whites to the plains of the present Orange Free State.

Towards the end of the 15th century, the efforts of the Portuguese to find a sea route to India around the Cape of Good Hope were crowned with success. They gave names all along the South African coast to bays, lagoons, islands, capes and other geographical features. It is noteworthy that Portuguese nomenclature does not extend to the interior of the country. The reasons for this are not difficult to find. The Portuguese were primarily interested in finding a sea route to India and had no desire to penetrate into the interior of the country. In addition, the hostile temperament of the natives and the inhospitable terrain discouraged any attempts in this direction.

Various Dutch navigators had named several geographical features along the South African coast prior to 1652, but Dutch nomenclature actually commenced from that date when a refreshment station was established at the Cape of Good Hope. Gradually the population increased and penetrated into the interior. Dutch place names were given, in many cases based on existing native names, or superseding them.

In 1688 and 1689 approximately three hundred French men, women and children arrived at the Cape. They were the Huguenots who fled from France as a result of religious persecution.

The Cape passed into the hands of the British in 1795 and again in 1806. After the latter date, particularly, English influence made itself felt on South African nomenclature. The arrival of the British settlers in the Eastern Cape in 1820 strengthened British influence, an influence which may be seen from the fact that English is at present one of the two official languages of the country.

After the Crimean War a number of Germans of the German Legion were brought to South Africa in 1857, and in the following year a number of German immigrants came to this country.

The Bantu races seem to have originally come from the basin of the Congo watershed. Thence they migrated towards the Sahara Desert and the Niger Valley, and subsequently in a north-easterly direction towards the Great Lakes and the sources of the Nile River. Thence a portion moved southwards, reaching the eastern parts of South Africa in the eighteenth century.

Thus it may be seen that there has been, and indeed still is, a great deal of physical and language contact between a great number of peoples, races and tribes. This contact can clearly be discerned in our nomenclature.

It is clear that the results on nomenclature of interlinguistic contact in a country with so divergent a population are particularly complex. Place names given by Bushmen and Hottentots have in many cases outlived them and their language. Added to this, the reproduction by Europeans in speech and writing of Khoisan place names, particularly the "click" sounds, have further complicated the position. Furthermore, subsequent occupiers of or visitors to the territory, being unacquainted with the original meanings of these names, have accommodated their sound and form into their own languages, so that considerable difficulty is experienced in tracing these names back to their original meaning and form. In many instances Folk Etymology has played a part in the corruption of names, but a large number of corruptions have occurred which are seemingly senseless, the resulting forms being of less significance than the original ones, or having no significance or meaning at all.

As may be expected in a country of so many different peoples, a vast number of hybrid place names occur.

Since place names of Khoisan origin will be discussed in this paper, a word or two concerning the so-called 'click'-sounds will not be out of place. Five clicks may be distinguished, namely: the dental click (/), formed by placing the tip of the tongue against the

back of the teeth and then rapidly withdrawing it; the palatal click (‡), formed by the rapid withdrawal of the tongue from the front of the palate, and resembling the sound made by clicking the thumb and middle finger; the lateral click (/ /), formed by the withdrawal of the anterior lateral portion of the tongue from the molars; the cerebral click (!), formed by rapidly withdrawing the tip of the tongue from the palate, and simulating the sound of a cork being withdrawn from a bottle, and finally the guttural click (X).

In view of the highly complex and far-reaching influence of interlinguistic contact on South African nomenclature, it is clear that a detailed account of all names reflecting such contact would be of sufficient magnitude to fill several volumes. I shall therefore indicate general principles, illustrating each of these with examples.

3. FOLK ETYMOLOGICAL CORRUPTIONS

By Folk Etymology is understood the unconscious corruption of existing names so that they may have meaning and significance for subsequent visitors to or inhabitants of the territory.

At the first glance *Acornhoek* would appear to be a hybrid place name, *acorn* being the familiar seed of the oak tree and *hoek* the Afrikaans word for 'blind valley'. In actual fact the particle *Acorn* is due to the Dutch pronunciation of the word *eekhoorn* 'a squirrel'. In this instance we have corruption by English speaking persons of a Dutch particle.

Camps Bay would seem to be a purely English place name, but in actual fact we have here a hybrid name; *Camps* is the corruption of a German personal name; that of Christopher Otto von Camptz, an owner of the farm on which this coastal town was established.

Chapman's Peak, in the Cape Peninsula, has nothing to do with anyone by the name of Chapman. The Goringhaikonas or Strandloper Hottentots were called *Kaapmans* by the early Dutch colonists, and this appellation, being unknown to the English, was corrupted to *Chapman's*.

Committees Flats, situated in the Eastern Cape Province, is stated to have been corrupted from the Afrikaans name *Kommetjies-vlakte* — a 'kommetjie' being 'a basin'. The area abounds in depressions similar to basins. It would appear, however, that the Afrikaans word *Kommetjie* is a Folk Etymological corruption of a Hottentot word, *Commages*, referring to larvae which the Hottentots dug up as food. In this particular case we have an instance of multiple Folk Etymology: Hottentot, Afrikaans and English.

In *Cundycleugh Pass*, a mountain pass in the Drakensberg range, we have a place name the first particle of which is of Scottish origin – *cundie* meaning ‘a hidden hole’ and *cleugh* ‘a rugged ascent or precipice’. Folk Etymology by Afrikaners, however, has caused the name to be encountered as *Kan-nie-klou Pass* – ‘cannot grip Pass’, indicating the inability to obtain a foothold.

A singularly interesting instance of multiple Folk Etymological corruption is *Ghaap*, also known as *Kaapseberg*, Afrikaans for ‘Cape Mountain’, *Kaap* meaning ‘Cape’, *berg* meaning ‘mountain’. Actually the original place name was *ṭhab*, a Hottentot word meaning ‘plateau’ or ‘flat-topped mountain’. Whites who subsequently arrived at the place interpreted the name as *Kaap* but, being ignorant of the meaning of *ṭhab*, added the suffix *-berg*.

Karringmelk is the Afrikaans name for ‘buttermilk’, but *Karringmelksrivier* has nothing whatever to do with buttermilk: it is the Bantu attempt to reproduce the Afrikaans personal name *Karel Nel* plus *rivier*, meaning ‘river’.

Similarly the Afrikaans word *koning* means ‘king’, while the place name *Koning* is the Afrikaans attempt to render the Bantu name *Kgoning* derived from *dikgon*, meaning ‘sticks’ or ‘firewood’.

Slang is the Afrikaans word for ‘snake’; *apie* is ‘little monkey’. But *Slangapiesberg* has no reference to either snake or monkey. We have a Folk etymological corruption of the Bantu *Hlangampisi* plus Afrikaans *berg*, meaning ‘mountain’. The initial *Hl* is a lateral spirant, thus easily interpreted as *s*.

A hybrid place name, *Libutsani Pool*, would at first glance appear to be comprised of Bantu and English elements. In actual fact, however, *Libutsani* is the Bantu attempt at reproducing or pronouncing the Afrikaans surname *Labuschagne*.

Lekkerwyn in its present form seems to be a most apt name for a wine-farm in the Paarl district of the Western Cape, since *lekker* means ‘pleasant’ or ‘nice’ and *wyn* is ‘wine’. In actual fact, however, we have an Afrikaans corruption of the French surname *Lecrevant*, to whom Governor Simon van der Stel granted the farm in 1690.

Perd is the Afrikaans word for ‘horse’. This name is borne by a farm in the Orange Free State. In this instance we have an example of Folk Etymology: the Afrikaans *Perd* is derived from the Australian name, *Perth*.

Grey’s River was so named in honour of Henry George Grey, Commander of the British forces and subsequently Lieutenant Governor of the Cape Colony. The name *Grey* was corrupted into

Kraai, Afrikaans for *crow*, and the name *Kraairivier* has completely superseded that of *Grey's River*.

Thus it can be seen how Folk Etymology has resulted because of language contact between English, Dutch, Bantu, German, French, Scottish, Hottentot, Afrikaans and Australian.

4. OTHER CORRUPTIONS

Apart from Folk Etymological corruptions of names, where later visitors or inhabitants alter the form or spelling of a name consciously or subconsciously so that it has meaning to them, a number of corruptions of place names occurs in which the resultant new name has less significance than the original, or no significance at all.

Algoa Bay, on the shores of which Port Elizabeth is situated, is a hybrid name. *Algoa* is derived from the Portuguese *lagoa*, 'morass' or 'lagoon'. Strangely enough, the name *Algoa* has been applied at various times to no less than three different places along the coast.

Camdebo, a region in the Graaff-Reinet district of the Eastern Cape Province, is a European corruption of the Hottentot words *am* 'green' and */gawib* 'heights, elevations' or *am* plus *t'Kouw* or *cha-khow* 'hippo'.

Congella, the name of a suburb of Durban in Natal, is the European corruption of the Zulu *umKangela* 'to view' or 'prospect'. From this point a fine view is obtained of Durban Bay and the Bluff.

Gobabis is the Europeanized form of the Hottentot name of a Rhenish mission station. The original Hottentot name is derived from *†Houb*, 'elephant', and */gub*, 'tooth' or 'tusk'. The place was so called because of the discovery of a large quantity of elephant bones and ivory.

Hantam is the European corruption of *Han†ami*, *Hani* being a type of veld bulb, *Wachendorfia paniculata*, *mi* derived from *homi*, 'mountain'.

Ibira, the Bantu name for a small river in the Eastern Cape Province, has been derived from Hottentot words, presumably *ab* 'river' and *Xa*, 'plenty' or 'riches'.

Klu-Klu, a tributary of the Kat River in the vicinity of Fort Beaufort, Cape Province, is the European colonists' pronunciation of *Xoxo* (from *Xhosa iXoxo*, 'toad'), the name of a Bantu chief. When one bears in mind that the *x* in *Xhosa* is a click sound, and that the *o* is similar in sound to the Ω in English *more*, it is not difficult to comprehend how *Xoxo* became *Klu-Klu*.

5. TRANSLATED PLACE NAMES

Interliguistic contact may also be detected in translated place names. Since most translations and dual forms exist in names of English and Afrikaans origin, I shall deal with these names at a later stage.

In the name *Buffalo River* in the Eastern Cape, we have an interesting example of corruption and multiple translation. The Hottentot name /*gaob ab*, from /*gaob* 'buffalo', and *ab* 'river', was translated by the Dutch as *Buffelsrivier* and subsequently by the English as *Buffalo River*.

The *Cape of Good Hope*, the name given to the southern promontory of South Africa, was originally named *Cabo da Boa Esperanza* by the Portuguese navigators and thereafter translated as 'Kaap de Goede Hoop' by the Dutch.

The English later translated as 'Cape of Good Hope'.

Dwarsrivier, literally 'Across River' or 'Skew River', is a small tributary of the Olifants River in the Clanwilliam district, and is the Dutch translation of the Hottentot name *Koignas*, from *gou* 'to cross, to go across'.

Quenera, a river in the East London district, Cape Province, is the Bantu rendering of the Hottentot words *Kani* 'eland' (*Taurotragus oryx*) and *ab* 'river'. This name has been translated into Afrikaans *Elandsrivier*.

Port St. Johns, situated at the mouth of the Umtamvuna River, is so called because of the wreck in this vicinity of the Portuguese galleon *São João*: *St Johns* is an English translation of *São João*.

Wamakervlei, a fertile valley in the Paarl district, Cape Province, is an Afrikaans translation of the French name *Val du Charron*. The English translation Wagon Maker's Valley also occurs.

6. HYBRID FORMS

As is to be expected in a country with such a heterogeneous population, a large number of hybridized name forms occur. Afrikaans and English being the two official European languages of the country, it is not surprising that names containing endings such as *Bay*, *Mountain*, *River*, *Flats*, *Pass*, etc. have the Afrikaans equivalents *-baai*, *-berg*, *-rivier*, *-vlakke*, *-pas* and the like.

Algoa Bay is a hybrid name, partly of Portuguese origin and partly English. The Afrikaans form *Algoabaai* is also encountered.

A hybrid form comprising Bantu, English and Afrikaans elements is *Debe Flats*, from Bantu *i-Debe* 'a tattooed person': the area is covered with long, narrow depressions, reminiscent of tattoo-marks. The Afrikaans form of this name is *Debevlakte*.

Caprivi Strip, for which the Afrikaans form is *Caprivistroom*, contains a German element. This region was so named in honour of Count Leo von Caprivi, a German statesman.

Chavonnesberg, where *berg* is the Afrikaans word for 'mountain' calls to mind Mauritz Pasques de Chavonnes, the French Huguenot governor of the Cape. Another hybrid name containing a French element is *Mouille Point*, from the French word *mouillier* 'to cast anchor', and the English word *point*.

Gerlach's Hoop and *Knapp's Hoop* are certainly English in form, but both names are composed of German personal names plus the Afrikaans word *hoop* meaning 'hope'. For these place names, the Afrikaans forms *Gerlachshoop* and *Knappshoop* are encountered.

Names consisting of Khoisan and English elements are *Karas Mountains*, with the Afrikaans form *Karasberg*; *Outeniqua Mountains*, for which the Afrikaans form *Outeniekwaberge* occurs; *Lake Ngami*, with the Afrikaans equivalent *Ngamimeer*, etc.

A particularly interesting hybrid place name is *Nougat Pass*. At first glance one might be tempted to assume that the first element is Afrikaans, since *nou* means 'narrow' and *gat* means 'hole'. In actual fact, however, we have here an instance of three different languages being represented. *Nou* is derived from the Hottentot word *noub*, the ochre with which, mixed with animal fat, the women smear themselves. *Gat* is the Afrikaans word for the 'hole' from which this ochre is obtained; while *Pass* is English.

7. DUTCH, AFRIKAANS AND ENGLISH NAMES

The first Europeans to settle in and inhabit South Africa were the Dutch. From their language Afrikaans evolved, gradually increasing in strength until it became one of the two official languages of the country. Dutch place names in South Africa have tended to become Afrikanerised, except in cases where the original Dutch names have become too firmly entrenched to be altered, as in the case of Paarl, Stellenbosch and the like. In point of fact, it is the policy of the Place Names Committee of the State Department of National Education to implement this policy. That is the reason why, in the course of this paper, I have used the terms Dutch and Afrikaans freely and interchangeably, since in many cases it is impossible to ascertain whether a specific place name is of Afrikaans origin, or whether it has been Afrikanerised.

So great has been the interaction between English and Afrikaans in this country that Afrikaans words have been adopted by the English-speaking South Africans to the extent that one cannot in

all cases ascertain whether such words were or still are Afrikaans. *Berg* 'mountain', *kloof* 'gorge' or 'valley', *nek* 'depression' or 'road over a mountain' and many others occur as frequently in English as in Afrikaans place names. *Krugersdorp*, where *dorp* means 'town', *Laing's Nek*, *Underberg*, *Trompetter's Drift* and many others are used by English and Afrikaners without a second thought. These and similar terms have become so thoroughly incorporated into English in South Africa that a South African hardly ever realizes that they are not actually English words.

A striking feature of South African place names of English and Afrikaans origin is that dual or bilingual forms occur; *Cape Town* and *Kaapstad*; *Simon's Town* and *Simonstad*; *Grahamstown* and *Grahamstad*; *Pilgrim's Rest* and *Pelgrimsrus* and many more.

Then, too, there are both Afrikaans and English forms for most names consisting of more than one element, regardless of whether the first particle is English or Afrikaans. Thus we encounter names such as *Hout Bay* and *Houtbaai*, from Afrikaans *hout* meaning 'wood'; *Eagle's Kop*, *kop* meaning 'hill' or 'hillock'; *Visrivier* for *Fish River*, *Manlea's Flats* and *Manleyvlakte*; *Halfway House* and *Halfweghuis*, *Breede River* and *Breederivier*, etc. In some cases translation has taken place, but not in all instances.

8. PERSONAL NAMES

Whites in South Africa live in close proximity to each other and intermarriage is an everyday occurrence. As a result, first names and even surnames are no indication of whether the person involved is Afrikaans or English-speaking. One finds people with English first names and Afrikaans surnames, and vice versa. All whites are bilingual to a greater or lesser degree, and immigrants to South Africa are encouraged to master both official languages.

9. CONCLUSION

In all probability no country in the world is so rich in interlinguistic contact as South Africa, and this contact is richly reflected in the toponymy and anthroponymy of the country. Bushmen, Hottentots, Bantu, Dutch, French, German, Scots, Portuguese, Afrikaans, English and others have all bestowed names, and language contact between these peoples, tribes and groups has left its mark to a greater or lesser degree.

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[The article was first published in ACTES DU XI^e CONGRES INTERNATIONAL DES SCIENCES ONOMASTIQUES, t. 2 (Sofia, 28. VI-4. VII. 1972), Sofia, 1975. It is reprinted with the permission of the author.]