A Semantic Analysis of Sesotho Place Names: Evidence from Bus Stop Names

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ABSTRACT

Naming is not just an act of linguistic labeling by which speakers of a language identify the entities they are referring to in the real or imaginary world. A name is not chosen arbitrarily but is chosen based on a combination of socio-cultural factors. This is because language cannot be divorced from culture, for it is through language that speakers reflect their cultural and sociolinguistic etiquette. This study examines the names of bus stops in Lesotho with a view to unveiling the factors that could have motivated the awarding of such names. Findings indicate that the names could be classified into the following categories: descriptive, metaphorical, experiential and mythological. The study concludes that through the names of bus stops, Basotho narrate their experiences, emotions and belief systems, among other things.

1. Introduction

Naming is an important part of any society's repertoire of linguistic behaviour. It is through naming that speakers of a language are able to identify the entities that are referred to in their world, be it real or imaginary. As Meiring (1993) pointed out, "To name objects is…part of the genetic make-up of man". Nonetheless, the choice of names is not haphazard but takes into consideration a number of factors. Although many studies have been undertaken in the area of onomastics (the study of names), as far as the researcher is aware, there is no literature in the naming practices of bus stop names, particularly in Lesotho.

The available literature on naming in Sesotho includes personal names (e.g. Mokhathi-Mbhele 2006; Matee 2006), names for taxis (Nyawo-Shava 2011) and names for dogs (Nkiwane (2014) as illustrated below:

Matee (2006) examined the Sesotho personal names with a view to unveiling the significance of such names. She observed that Sesotho personal names are a reflection of circumstances, experiences and events that surround the birth of the name bearer. Hence, she pointed out that, "In the Basotho society, a name is not just given for the sake of naming" (Matee, 2006, P.22). Mokhathi-Mbhele (2006) also studied Sesotho personal names. She observed that while the names convey important socio-cultural information, they are analysable into syntactic components such as phrase types and sentence types.

Nyawo-Shava (2011) made a semantic analysis of names given to taxis in Maseru, Lesotho. She categorised names into eight groups, namely, music, religion, entertainment, politics, social, education and media. She noted that in deciding on a name, owners want to communicate some information. For instance, a taxi whose name is *Professor* is meant to be the best taxi, just as professor is the highest academic rank. Similarly, the name *Thunderstorm* implies that the taxi has to be associated with speed, perfection and consistence. It is against this background that Nyawo-Shava (2011, P.45) concluded that "by giving names to their taxis, they [Basotho] believe that names are a summation of the essence of the being of a person or an object. A name brings to the fore characteristics and traits of that person or thing".

Another study, on naming, was conducted by Nkiwane (2014). She studied the factors that determine the awarding of names in Basotho dogs. She observes that the names are not just labels but they communicate certain important information about the dog itself (e.g. circumstances surrounding its birth) or the owner (his/her attitude towards his /her neighbours) hence such names as Bamohloile (loosely translated 'They hate him/her').

2. Purpose of the Study

This study examines the naming system of place names in Lesotho, in particular, the names for bus stops. It is hoped that this study will shed more light on the Sesotho onomastics, particularly naming system of place names by analysing bus stop names.

Unlike naming practices for personal names where naming is the prerogative of certain individuals in the family, or names for animals, where the owner awards the name, naming for bus stops in Lesotho is done mostly on an ad hoc basis by anybody. The name-givers are usually members of the specific community. It is important to note that in Lesotho, the name-giver does not just decide on a name and people just accept it. The name is accepted if the society feels that it reflects what they know or believe about

the place. In this regard, it can be argued that Sesotho bus stop names are laden with lots of information. This is in line with Pei (1966 and Wainwright (1962), quoted in Rainey (1978, P.1) that geographical names comprise "a rich source of ethnic, historical and folklorist information".

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the names of bus stops in Lesotho. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

a) What are the names of the bus stops in Lesotho?

b) What is the motivation for deciding on a name?

c) What are the conventional expectations when people see or hear the name of a bus stop?

Based on the above-mentioned research questions, the study will:

a) Identify the names of the bus stops in Lesotho

b) Find the literal meanings of the names given

c) Identify the features the name is meant to highlight about the place

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The data was collected from thirty Semantics (ELX 3014) third year students. The students come from different districts of Lesotho and are all Sesotho native speakers. Although the aim of any research is to investigate exhaustively about a particular subject, constraints such as time, expense and geographic distance often make it impractical to investigate the whole population. This explains why researchers often prefer to draw a sample, as opposed to studying the whole population. The sample for this study was not based on statistical procedures as the study is mostly qualitative. It is important to observe that in qualitative

research, there are no definite rules regarding the sample size. For as Du Plooy (2001) rightly points out, the validity, meaningfulness and insights generated from qualitative design have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected than with the sample size. Thus, it can be argued that since these students represented inhabitants from all the ten districts of Lesotho, their responses were representative of the naming system in Lesotho and a reflection of Basotho's outlook of life.

Regarding the choice of this group of students from among the four groups in the different courses the researcher teaches, probability sampling, which is a cover term for simple, systematic, stratified, cluster and multi stage-sampling (Du Plooy, 2001), was used to select the group. The choice for this type of sampling was based on the observation that the methods used are generally free of bias since the sample is chosen randomly.

3.2 Data collection tools and procedures

The students were each given a questionnaire in which they were asked to write as many names as possible for the bus-stop they knew. For every name, they were required to provide the location (name of the village and district) where that bus stop is found. Lastly, they were asked to provide an explanation as to what motivated or could have motivated the awarding of each name they gave. After collecting the students' questionnaires, the researcher studied the names systematically and categorised them according to the features they shared. The study, thus, adopted both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. Since the overall aim of this research was to study the names for bus stops, with the intention to examining the motivations behind the naming, the quantitative approach, or more precisely, descriptive statistics, was used to

calculate frequencies and percentages. After identifying and counting the names, the researcher interpreted them in order to meet the other objectives of the study, namely, to find the literal meanings of the names, and find the reasons for the award of such names. This is a qualitative analysis. Combining these two approaches helped to bring about a fuller understanding of naming system.

With regard to the analysis, particularly the frequency counts, it is worth mentioning that when students mentioned the same name for a bus stop, or the same name for bus stops in different regions, such cases were treated as one occurrence. This is because the interpretations were the same, and, since I was more concerned with the quality of the data rather than quantity, I disregarded other instances of occurrence. In short, each name was counted only once. For the detailed analysis, the following categories were identified; descriptive, metaphorical, experiential and mythological names. These categories are made on the basis of the meanings and or interpretation of the names. The categories are briefly explained below:

a) Descriptive :

Bus stop, names that appeared in this category, carried the literal meaning. In other words, they were self-explanatory as it was immediately clear to the hearer as to what he/she could expect to see. Knowledge of the literal interpretation of the word would determine what kind of spot one would be referring to. For instance, when a hearer is told to get off at *Mangopeng* bus stop, he/she expects to see dongas in the vicinity of the bus stop. This is because *mangopeng* is an adverb derived from *mangope*, a noun which means dongas. Similarly, when a bus stop is named

Lishopong (where there are shops), one expects to see some shops in the vicinity.

b) Metaphorical:

Names, classified under this category, could be interpreted metaphorically. For instance, the bus stop named *Mokoallong* (an adverb derived from the noun *mokoallo*) would resemble the entity the Basotho refer to as *mokoallo*. *Mokoallo* refers to the removable poles put at the entrances of the Basotho kraals. The *mokoallo* is used to block entrance to, and departure from the kraal. So a bus stop named *Mokoallo* suggests that it is the last bus stop for a particular route. The bus/taxi cannot go beyond that pick-up/drop-off point. Another example is *Kanana* (referring to the Biblical Canaan-the land of plenty). The bus stop *Kanana* is located in a very remote area with poor infrastructure. However, there is one village which has electricity- a sign of a good life if one lives in the surrounding area. As the bus stop is within the vicinity of that village, which, because of the availability of infrastructure, was named Kanana, the same name was given to the pick-up/drop-off point.

c) Experiential :

Bus stops, in this category, are named based on the experiences or knowledge about a place. In other words, these bus stops store information about the history of a place. Whether the story is true or not is beyond the scope of this research. For instance, the bus stop named *Phiring* (derived from *phiri*- a hyena) is based on the story that a hyena was killed there some time in the past. Similarly, the bus stop named *Taoa-lea-nya* (loosely translated 'a drunkard soils himself') derives its name from an alleged experience of a drunkard who was found there too drunk to go home and had soiled himself.

d) Mythological :

This category includes the names of bus stops which reflect the society's belief system, usually in the supernatural (the existence of ghosts, witches and so on). For instance, *Lithotseleng* and *Khoaba-lea-bua* are examples of bus stops whose naming is proof of the society's beliefs. *Lithotseleng* (from the word *lithotsela* meaning ghosts) suggests that the place is infested with ghosts. Similarly, the name *Khoaba-lea-bua* (loosely translated 'a crow talks') suggests that, at that particular place, there was a crow which would talk like the humans do.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings related to the names, the frequency counts as well as the interpretations of the bus stop names.

Frequency counts indicate that there were 62 different names for bus stops across the ten districts. The names were distributed along the four categories as illustrated in the previous categories. As mentioned earlier, the frequency counts exclude repetitions as each name was counted only once. In other words, several counts of the same name were counted as one occurrence. This distribution is reflected in table 1 below:

Table 1: Classification of Sesotho bus stop names

Category	Frequency	Examples	Meaning	Motivation for naming
Descriptive	38	Lepoqong	Dusty place	The place is dusty and unpaved
		Koaring	Where quarry is excavated	Quarry nearby
		Lefikeng	On a big rock	Big rock nearby
		Sekarapeng	On a scrap car	Scrap car nearby
		Mahlabatheng	On plenty of sand	Piles of sand nearby
		Bohlasoeng	At an untidy place	Untidiness of the place
Experiential	16	Thoteng-ea-likhang	Open space for competition/arguments	Drivers drive at high speed as if in competition.
		Satalla	Stand still for a long time	One waits for the taxi/bus for a long time
		Takalatsa	Stand/lie with legs stretched wide apart	A man was found dead nearby and his legs were stretched apart
		Moshoela- ngaka	For death of a doctor	A traditional doctor was found dead nearby
		Boshoela-pere-le motho	For death of a horse and man	A danger zone where animals and people are often killed in accidents
Mythological	5	Kiribaeng	At a wheelbarrow	Claims of a ghost which used to drag a wheelbarrow every night
		Ngoana-oa-lla	A child cries	Claims of a baby who was found dead and abandoned. It is alleged that the baby cries every night, perhaps crying out to his mother.
		Sefate-sea-bua	A tree talks	Claims of a talking tree
		Khoaba-lea-bua	A crow talks	Claims of a talking crow
		Lithotseleng	Among ghosts	A place believed to be infested with ghosts.
Metaphorical	3	Mokoallong	Kraal entrance blocker	The spot marks the end of the route
		Lengoeleng	At a knee	A curve resembling a knee
		Kanana	In Canaan	The village whose inhabitants seem to live an easy life

As can be seen from table 1 above, bus stop names that belong to the Descriptive category were the most frequent, amounting to more than half of the names. It would seem that as the names in this category are self-explanatory, they were awarded with the sole purpose of making it easy for passengers to locate the referent (i.e. the

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exact bus stop). For most of these names, the referent could be easily located by any competent speaker of the Sesotho language, even if he/she had not been to that place before. For instance, if one was told to get off at the bus stop named *Mahlabatheng,* what would readily come to one's mind would be to be on the lookout *for mahlabathe* 'piles of sand'. Similarly, if one was told to get off at Bohlasoeng 'an untidy place', one would easily locate the place because of the physical features.

One problem related to this category is to consider what would happen if circumstances, or the physical features of the location, changed. For instance, would the bus stop currently named *Bohlasoeng*, (an untidy place), still be referred to by the same name if the municipality were to remove all the rubbish dumped at that site? Would the name now be *Makhetheng* (a clean place)? Would the names such as *Machaeneng* and *Makuleng,* which are so named because the owners are Chinese and Indians respectively, change if the buildings or shops were owned by people of different nationalities? Would *Lefikeng* still maintain its name even when the rock (*lefika*) has been removed? The answer to these questions is in the negative. Experience has shown that the names tend to be retained. There are many places whose names are self-explanatory but the feature that the name suggests cannot be identified. For instance, there is a bus stop named *Mahlabatheng* in the Maseru district but one cannot see any piles of sand (*mahlabathe*) in the vicinity. In such cases, the names would now be classified under the category of events as discussed below:

The second most frequent category was Experiential. Names in this category accounted for a quarter of the names. As pointed out earlier, each name in this category has a story to tell. Unlike names in the previous category, which are self-explanatory, the names in this category relate to the past events. It is important to note that although the names in this category are far less than the names in the descriptive category, as time moves, and the places lose a physical resemblance to the feature being highlighted, they will fall under the experiential category. Thus, *Mahlabatheng,* for instance, would now have a new meaning 'a place where there used to be piles of sands'. If *Lepoqong* "dusty place" is paved, the name of the bus stop might not change but it would have a new meaning. In brief, the frequency counts are expected to increase in this category in the future.

The next category is the mythological category with just below a tenth of the occurrences. As indicated earlier, this category reflects the Basotho belief systems. While the names in this category relate to events in the same way as the names in the experiential category, the main difference, between the two, is that in this category the events being referred to are unreal and impossible. For instance, crows can only talk in the mythological/folklore narratives. The last group, the metaphorical, is related to the resemblance category in that the feature emphasised is visibly comparable to the some entities. Perhaps the low frequency for this category derives from the fact that the primary purpose of these names are to give direction, and, in the absence of any physical feature available, the local community would use comparisons.

The findings in this study are consistent with findings in previous studies on naming in the Basotho society. For instance, just as names for people are awarded in remembrance of particular circumstances , experiences or events (see Nkiwane, 2006), the names for bus stops, particularly those in

the Experiential category, reflect the experiences of the society about such locations. The findings are also consistent with the study by Nyawo-Shava (2011) where she observed that the names for taxis are awarded to highlight the characteristics of the taxi. In the same way, it was observed that names for bus stop, particularly those in the metaphorical category, are used to highlight the resemblance of bus stop with the entities they are named after. This is also consistent with a study of naming for dogs where Nkiwane (2014) observed that the names may also communicate information about the attitude of the owner. In this study, it was observed names such as Kanana (Canaan) are indicative of the society's view of the people living in the vicinity of the bus stop.

5. Conclusions

This study has attempted to show the motivations for awarding place names among the Basotho local communities. From the data analysis and discussion, it has been observed that the names are not arbitrarily awarded but serious considerations for the appropriateness of the names are made. Names are, thus, not only linguistic labels but are a socio-cultural phenomenon indicating a society's experiences, emotions and belief systems, among other things. To this end, it can be concluded that the different categories of names reflect a certain world-view of the Basotho people. For instance, the names in the Descriptive category are merely referential, carrying only the denotative meanings. Names in the Metaphorical category, on the contrary, reflect the sophisticated thought processes of those who award such names. With regard to the names in the Experiential category, it can be argued that they point to the importance the Basotho people attach to historical events. They are therefore symbolic. Lastly, names in the Mythological category indicate that myths play such a big role in the culture of Basotho people that they are given permanent reference in the form of bus-stop names.

To conclude, it has been observed that this study has been limited to the semantic aspects of the names. Other areas not explored in this study, for example, the syntax of these names, should constitute ground for further research. It is however believed that the study will benefit other researchers who are interested in the study of place names.

About the Author

Puleng 'Makholu Letsoela holds a PhD in English Language and Linguistics. She is a lecturer in the Language and Linguistics Unit of the Department of English at the National University of Lesotho. She is currently the Head of Department. She has previously served as a Coordinator of the Communication and Study Skills Unit (CSSU) in the Department of English. Her research interests include, English for Academic Purposes, Professional Communication, Grammar, Semantics and Discourse Analysis.

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Appendix:

Questionnaire:

NAMES FOR BUS-STOPS IN LESOTHO

Dear student,

I am conducting a study on the names of bus stops in Lesotho. Please fill in the following questionnaire:

NAME OF YOUR VILLAGE AND DISTRICT
_____

HOW LONG HAVE YOU STAYED THERE?
_____

NAME OF THE BUS STOP	WHERE THE BUS STOP IS FOUND (VILLAGE AND DISTRICT)	REASONS FOR GIVING SUCH A NAME