

Nicknaming And Self-Nicknaming In South Africa: Emerging Trends In Tsonga Onomastics

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Abstract

A nickname is an unofficial name that is used to identify a person. The name is either given by another person or, in some context, a person names himself or herself. Worth mentioning is the fact that nicknames do not appear on a person's identity document but they are at times more popular than those names that have been registered as official. The writer employed interviews and observation techniques to gather the necessary information for the paper. Ten interviewees (who have been identified as denominatums with self-given nicknames) have been contacted in soliciting data for the paper. The purpose of this paper is to analyse Tsonga nicknames that people use to name themselves.

Keywords: Onomastic, Name, Nickname, Semantics, self-nicknaming.

I. INTRODUCTION

Onomastics is a very critical discipline in human lives. Names, in general, are bestowed to different entities such as places, animals, plants, human beings and the like. All these things are named so as to identify the named entity especially when calling it out of a number of other similar or common things. Among names given to human beings are nicknames. It is worth mentioning that such nicknames are more often than not given by people other than the named person (Mapindani, 2014). Nevertheless, this study is devoted to the analysis of Tsonga nicknames that individuals are either given or give to themselves to achieve some eccentric ends.

Naming is a very crucial aspect among human beings. It is a very critical component that qualifies and reinforces humanity's life and existential value. Naming, as a process, encompasses the bestowal of names to places, human beings, schools, towns, provinces among other entities. The study of names, popularly known as onomastics, falls under the broader discipline of semantics. It is also relevant to indicate that the onomastic discipline is subdivided into two broader categories

branching as general onomastics and literary onomastics (Chauke, 2005). This research, being part of general onomastics, specifically looks at nicknames that individuals either give to themselves, or are given by others. Critical at this level of analysis is to point out that names are very important aspects in human life. This is especially so when such names have been bestowed as transparent tags that unveil critical meanings to the people or societies concerned. It has been observed that most names have meanings but it has often been found that these meanings are either hidden or undergone semantic shifts and at times very difficult to trace back to the original import and relevancy of the given name (Suzman, 1994). Furthermore, it has been observed that names are part and parcel of human tradition(s), and name givers often bestow names aligning them to the traditions that be in their contemporary societies. This gives the names relevancy and significance within the societies in which they are both given and used.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mushwana and Chauke (2015) carried out a research on naming patterns among the Vatsonga by focusing on characters in Thomas Chauke's selected songs. The study aimed at analysing

nicknames given to players in the composition of Dr Thomas Chauke's songs. In their analysis, it was found that the singer frequently employs nicknames in the naming of some of his characters as he composed his songs. Though this study centres upon the practice of nicknaming by a Tsonga speaker, it from the present study in that the current study deals with nicknames that individuals give themselves.

Mabasa (2018) examines nicknames given to learners in schools. It has been found that such nicknames were given by either teachers or young children. The study also revealed that learners can also easily succeed in their school endeavours if such nicknames are used. The researcher revealed that learners were glad to receive nicknames that were bestowed by their teachers than those given by their peers. This study falls well within the scope of the present study because of the relatedness of some of the findings that are found in both studies.

Mabasa (2013) also addresses satirical issues using Tsonga given names, pointing out how such satirical names have originated. The research also details how such satirical names have originated, as well as a hint on the significance of such names in human life. In view of the essence unveiled in the analysis of such names, the researcher proceeds to mention that such satirical names have to be used in the crafting of literary scripts as a way of preserving the names for the benefit of future generations. The realisation of the importance of satirical names is made explicit when the research points out that names are not given for the sake of it but there would be a reason behind the bestowal of every given name. This is made clear in the ensuing quote:

Mavito a yo thyiwa ntsena, naswona a yo va mavito ntsena, ku ni nsusumeto wo karhi eka vathyi hi ku landza swiyimo swa matshamelo ya timhaka hi ku hambanahambana hambu ku tisa hungu ro karhi, ku tisa ntlhotlho wo karhi kumbe ndzandzelerisano hi ximunhuhatwa xo karhi eka vaakatiko (Mabasa, 2013: 84).

(Names are not given for the sake of it, and they are not merely names but there would

be a motive behind amongst name givers in line with the state of prevailing varied circumstances, like to pass information, to bring some challenge or some kind of sequencing by a given character amongst citizens).

Mabasa also found out that names may be given in order to disparage, to celebrate, to insult or to reflect one's unpleasant condition. The study recommends that the study of names be included in school curriculums as a way of disseminating the value and intangible heritage embodied in names.

Machaba (2004) points out to the detestable reality that overshadowed Africa at the advent of African encounter with Western civilisation. Thus westerners brought their cultural traditions and instilled among Africans the notion that all that is theirs is evil and all that is Western is pure and divine. This encouraged Africans to learn and copy Western traditions and proceeded to give Western names to their children. Machaba proceeds to point out that the natives were forced to have two different names were one was a colonial name and the other an indigenous one. Even government officials were seized with the duty to give Western names to those who did not have them. Machaba's research proceeds to point out that blacks who had joined the Roman Catholic Church who did not have Western names were viewed obliquely as not Christian enough to be considered for baptism. It is also pointed out that African names were translated to English names so as to be considered legitimate, for example, *Ntsako* could translate to joy so as to make some sense in the ears of colonial masters.

Chauke (2005) details the significance of personal names and a revelation of how different names are/have been accorded. The research points out how different schools, churches and hospitals have played a starring role in the display of names given to key historical figures. The study, however, proceeds to indicate how contemporary naming trajectories have tilted from the tradition of naming entities using such historic personalities to naming things after

prevailing economic, political, religious and such other modern aspects of influence.

Chauke also points out how grandparents and aunts used to be very critical in giving names to children, well before the advent of Christianity. Children could be named either after their departed or living grandparents. Others could be named after family ancestors. The research further notes that things are now different since families are largely composed of nuclear membership where relatives have no voice. This brings in a new dimension in today's naming pattern where a child's parents become the immediate members tied with the responsibility to name their child. The research found out that naming patterns follow similar trajectories across the world. Chauke (2005) concludes by pointing out that names, across different ethnicities, have meanings and they also reveal an ethnic group's both history and traditions.

Mapindani (2018) explores the concept of names given to both male and female initiates amongst the Tsonga people. In his research, Mapindani indicates that the practice of giving initiation names is much related to such practices where one gives someone a name or names themselves using a nickname. The study posits that the process of initiation is a critical undertaking amongst the Tsonga people in that it makes the initiate a liberated personality who name themselves. This shift from the zone of 'social bondage' to the social sphere of liberty is well revealed in this naming process whereby one substitutes their original name by a name from the initiation college. It is also made clear that names that people get at birth only serves their kindergarten purposes but the bestowal of initiation names is a sign that someone has grown up and can now responsibly handle their own affairs. Mapindani (2018) also suggests that amongst the Tsonga people, child names are temporary since they only last until the initiation stage

III. METHODOLOGY

The research employed the qualitative approach in soliciting the most needed information. In

defining this approach, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) has the following to say:

Qualitative research is defined as a multi perspective approach (utilizing different qualitative techniques and data collection method) to social interaction, aimed at describing, making sense of, interpreting of or reconstruction of this interaction in terms of the meanings that the subjects attach to it.

Thus, the approach encompasses various angles of collecting and interpreting gathered information, in this context, obtained or inferred from chosen nicknames. This approach is especially suitable in that the research is not based on mathematical quantities that would require to be dealt with using quantitative methods but phenomena that requires the discursive and interpretive analysis using plain language. This makes it vital for a researcher to select a paradigm that will properly guide him or her within the relevance of his/her study (De Vos et al., 2014).

Theoretical grounding

The research is underpinned by the Descriptive Theory, founded by Kripte (1980). In line with this theory, every name has some meaning and has been named for a cause. This theory will therefore assist immensely in the analysis of selected names that is nicknames that their bearers named themselves. Thus, the theory posits that it is improper to have names that carry opaque meanings with opaque causes for naming. At times it may be found that the nicknamed does not know the meaning or cause for naming of his/her nickname but such aspects would be there. The theory will play a critical role in the analysis of nicknames selected for analysis in this study since such nicknames were given by their bearers who have full knowledge of both the meaning and cause for self-naming.

Data Analysis

Collected data has been analysed using thematic content analysis. The analysis, following this method, was done through the investigation of a singular theme from which other thematic

subheadings were generated. In this method of analysis, meanings for the selected nicknames have been discerned and subtopics generated thereafter. The method, therefore, works well alongside the selected technique, which is the qualitative research technique. Bardin (2011:101) makes this clear in the following way:

Content analysis is defined as a set of analytical techniques (syntactic, lexical and thematic), in which systematic and objective procedures are employed to describe the content of messages, using qualitative ... indicators that allow knowledge to be inferred.

Bardin (2011) reinforces how thematic content analysis presents as an analysis procedure that can be used for the analysis of different linguistic aspects. This encompasses names as well, and how they can be analysed to infer both surface and underlying semantic values.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics are fundamentally critical in every research undertaking, be it formal or informal, public or private, academic or non-academic. In this study, the aspect of ethical consideration has been observed through the preparation of consent forms that were sent to interviewees prior the actual interviewing exercise. The forms presented clearly how both parties, the interviewer and the interviewee, should contact themselves during and after the interview. These ethical forms were designed in such a way that they could entice the interviewees to voluntarily take part in the interviews without anticipating any form of payment or award.

Instances of self-nicknaming and being nicknamed amongst the Vatsonga people

One such a name is *Madyaswayena* (the one who eats his/her own). The name is a self-given nickname that is usually favoured by one who either works hard to achieve gains out of his/her sweat or has already established themselves so much that they no longer expect any hand from anyone. Thus, *Madyaswayena* being, a self-reliant person does not trouble anyone for want

of anything. At times it is noticeable that many who self-name themselves with such a nickname start off being impoverished, but go through trying conditions of hard work until they come to a level of self-location. They then use this nickname as a sounding whistle to pronounce their newly attained status. It also becomes both a memorial and a celebratory mark to remind them and console them in their new and better world of self-reliance. Of significance is to consider that the name has a broader significance in the life of the denominatum. Though it seems as if it is about food (eating), its import umbrellas quite a number of things that makes one's life liveable and satisfactory. *Madyaswayena* feels satisfied with his/her clothes, the level of satisfaction in terms of family needs, houses, and other life necessities without which life becomes heavy and burdensome.

N'wamavuyantsena is yet another self-given nickname that speaks a lot about the name bearer. It can be revealed right here that naming among the Vatsonga people is at times guided by some trends or patterns peculiar to all communities. For example, when addressing, especially, a married woman with reverence people usually use the shortened form *N'wa-* representing the daughter of. That is a shortened version of *n'wana wa-* (the daughter of), that is usually followed by the name of the father to the daughter, like *N'wa-Xirhilele*, *N'wa-Hasani*, *N'wa-Pensele* and the like. In the case of *N'wamavuyantsena*, the name is neither gender specific nor has it anything to do with the relationship of the name bearer to his/her father. The name is a self-given name that a person uses to describe his/her situation after going away for greener pastures and then come back empty-handed. However, it is necessary to point out that the name can also, especially, be used to label someone by other people since it is not a pleasant description for any sensible being. In a sense, the nickname gives connotations of lack of good judgement and sense as the name bearer ends up appearing a ridiculous laughing stock in society. There is also *Makhensarixile* (being certain after dawn/sunrise). The name came about as a result of the name bearer's prolonged illness. The

informant revealed that the illness was so intense that he was no longer sure if he will survive. This condition prompted the informant to come up with the name *Makhensarixile*, to denote the condition of uncertainty and unpredictability of what may happen during the longevity of an unrestful night. It has been confirmed that the name bearer had tried to seek help from various entities encompassing traditional healers, doctors, prophets and sundry but no solution was secured. Even the closest relatives had lost hope since the nickname bearer would always say to them, *ndzo khensa loko ri xile* (I only believe that I am still alive at dawn). During the interview, the respondent said:

Ndzi tithyile vito ra Makhensarixile hikuva hi ntiyiso a ndzi nga ha tshembi leswaku ndzi nga ha hanya tanihileswi a ndzi khomekile ku tlula ni mpimo leswi a swi endla leswaku ndzi khensa loko rixile ndza ha copeta.

(I nicknamed myself Makhensarixile since, truly, I no longer had any hope of survival because the situation was very bad. This made me assure myself that I am still alive when I rise up in the morning with my eyes still twinkling)

This citation heralds a very painful background surrounding the circumstances that gave rise to the bestowal of the nickname. It has been discovered that the nickname bearer later on abbreviated the nickname to Makhense since the original cause for the nickname had passed.

At times a nickname may require some philosophical analysis to unpack before arriving successfully at the real meaning. *Mahlanganakuhleka* is such a nickname. The name has a very painful interpretation. According to the interviewee, the nickname came about after some people who pretended to be friendly were discovered to be fake friends who had some hidden agendas. They could laugh, smile and appear to be together on the face of it yet deep down they were true enemies. This prompted the nickname bearer to name himself *Mahlanganakuhleka* implying that they only meet at the point of laughing but their hearts were far away. Thus the name is significant in

today's societies in that people may pretend to love someone when in actual fact they hate them. Another self-given nick name is *Nkalaxaka*. It has been discovered that some self-given nicknames are bestowed when the name bearers are still young (Crozier and Skliopidou, 2002). According to the gathered information, the nickname *Nkalaxaka* was given during the nickname bearer's adolescent years. Gathered data reveal that the nickname bearer gave himself this nickname during his university years when he used to face monetary challenges amidst well to do university mates. According to him, he lacked financial support from his parents since they were too old to work and they only depended on old-age sustenance from the South African government. He then gave himself this name as a sign of humility before other students who thought he unnecessarily depended on them. It was also revealed that he at times used it after failing some of his modules due to lack of some necessary educational requirements. In most cases, he would use his self-given nickname to arouse and kick start a conversation with his peers even during serious occasions when he had no money for food. Of interest is the fact that the nickname continued to be used well after the completion of his studies. According to Khuboni (2003:8), nicknames can endure and this is unveiled in the following way:

The nickname may continue to be used or disappear depending on the circumstances and the nature of the nickname. If such a nickname endures, it creates a dual identity.

It is commonplace that nicknames continue to be used even for the rest of one's life. People tend to favour one's nickname and shun a person's original, official name. However, some nicknames may disappear as soon as the nickname bearer leaves the place and activities that led to the bestowal of the nickname.

The nuances raised in the aforementioned nickname chains down to the name *Munyenyiwa*. In Xitsonga, the verb *ku nyenyiwa* means to be shunned or loathed, and may as well connotatively imply being despised, segregated or hated. Thus, an observation of the richness and the context in which self-given nicknames

originate gives clue to the level of thoughtfulness rendered to the philosophy by the self-namer. The name *Munyenyiwa* is a gender-neutral nickname. Information obtained from the informant revealed the painful incident prior to his birth. It became clear that his father decided to divorce with his mother during her pregnancy and left her to faint for herself. The informant nicknamed himself thus after having dug for the information on why his surname was just the same with that of his mother. Thought the mother stammered about in hesitance of divulging the painful socio-marital precedence, the grandmother eventually let the cat out of the bag. The informant explains it saying, “Manana va ringetile ku ala ku huma ni ntiyiso, kambe eku heteleleni ndzi swi tivile leswaku ndzi lo nyenyiwa hi tatana” (My mother tried to hide the truth but at last I learnt that I had been loathed by my father). Though the nickname, on the surface, appear to be a mark of great pain and shame upon himself and circumstances surrounding his life, he often uses it as a celebratory icon since he is someone who has made a name for himself in life despite his unfortunate background.

It can also be conceded that the analysis of certain self-given nicknames is so intricate that you can not tell or decipher a name’s significance until you are told by the name bearer. The reason behind this scenario is that some names do not reflect upon the name bearer’s background. Such an example is presented by the nickname *Xihanyahimati*. The researcher discovered that the name started in some work places with one self namer who used it jokingly to describe his condition of not taking up food with other workers. It would happen that when others went out for lunch and have their lunch, the person would just take a glass of water. When asked why he was doing this, he would simply say, hi mina xihanyahimati (I am someone who lives on water), implying that he depends on water for his sustenance. However, further inquiry from the interviewees proved that *Xihanyahimati* was a very budget-cautious person who would not want to spend money impromptly. This state, therefore, was the compelling force behind *Xihanyahimati*’s puzzling self-nicknaming.

Xamuganga (for the community) is a self-given name denoting someone who does remarkable things for the community. According to the data obtained from the nicknamed, the name bearer had many girlfriends and countless illegitimate children in the community. The name, at first was used as a jesting appellation amongst his fans. With the passage of time, the name became widely known and popularised in the community. Though some nicknames eventually disappear or become unpopular, *Xamuganga* is increasingly becoming popular and it is believed that it will become his last name in life. This gives clue to how many nicknames eventually become formalised as surnames in many instances among the Vatsonga.

Among the collected self-given nicknames is *Mapetachomi* (the one who immerses his or her friend). Traditionally, *ku peta munhu nhloko* (immersing/dipping someone’s head) is an idiom which describes a scenario where a person exposes another person to risky or dangerous circumstances. The term *-chomi* means a friend, and when combined, means the one who dips his/her friend. It is terrifying to imagine how one may then survive when his/her head is immersed in water or any kind of liquid save yielding to suffocation. This name *Mapetachomi* takes a different dimension in that, unlike other nicknames which were self-given labels, the nickname is given by people after an observation of the situations prevailing prior or at the time of naming. It can be used to describe a situation where a lady influences another lady into love relationships with someone, and when the relationship turns out sour and dangerous, say the lady reluctantly and accidentally falls pregnant or affected by some sexually transmitted diseases, people may nickname the one who influenced the victim into such relationships, *Mapetachomi* to describe she led her friend to such an unpleasant fate. Another dimension would involve men who may influence each other to go stealing people’s belongings. When their strategies fail and one of them is caught and sued or shot dead, people will also nickname the survivor(s) (va) *Mapetachomi*, describing the unpalatable

destiny to which they blindly led their victimised friend.

Mahlambaxingabasi (the one who remains dirt after taking a bath) is another given name that comes from observers. It denotes that the nicknamed cannot be clean irrespective of the exerted effort to clean himself or herself. In real life, it is evident that a person goes through various stages of development. This nickname is usually given during one's adolescence when many expectations from one's surroundings are unveiled and hampered upon the youthful years. People expect an adolescent to be in a position to wash themselves clean, to dress up smartly and to reflect qualities of maturity. When the observed fails to meet certain expectations, they become vulnerable and prone to being nicknamed as a sign that clearly spells out their state of 'social inadequacy'. Thus, such a person would be always palish and unattractive as if they don't bath themselves, hence the name *Mahlambaxingabasi*.

Madyakubomba is a nickname that can fall on either category. That is it can be either self-given or given by members of the community in question. The name may be broken into two parts, *Madya-* the one who eats, and *-kubomba* which means to dress oneself elegantly. On one hand, the name may be used to refer to someone whose main worry is taking a bath and dress himself or herself smartly. The rest of the activities that bring upon food and other basic necessities are of less value to such a one. If this person is in a family where others will be working when he or she will be busy with neatening stuff, others may complain and even come to a level where they fall out with one another. Such sarcastic words like, "*u ta dya ku bomba*" (you will eat your tidiness) may ooze out of the angry fellows' minds in condemnation of the uncelebrated action. On the other hand, the name may be a self-given appellation whereby a person gives himself or herself as a personal praise name. In some cases, the person may even boast around saying I am a white-coloured worker, so I am always spick and spun, dirt treads far away from me.

Among the Vatsonga people, a child may be nicknamed *Masaswivona* after the child's both parents are deceased. *Masaswivona* describes the child's condition of vulnerability and uncertainty in the jungle of life, without anyone as close and as reliable as a parent responsible for a child's both present and future welfare. In the case of self-nicknaming, one of the interviewees pointed out that the motive for self-naming emerged after the death of so many relatives within a very short period of time. This meant that the person was left alone to meet all the challenges in the world without anyone to report to, or even share with, hence *Masaswivona* for the one who remains behind to meet all the challenges. It can be conceded as well that the name can also address issues to do with an individual where after the death of other key relatives, remains alone as the only key figure in a broader family composed of young and frivolous members who are still yet to be guided on matters to do with life.

IV. FINDINGS

The study found out that there are quite number of Xitsonga nickname bearers who carry self-given nicknames. It was also found that such names are not only valued by the bearers but they proceed to praise themselves using such names since they are the ones who bestowed them upon themselves. It was also found that

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this paper's findings, it is recommended that the Vatsonga people proceeds with the self-nicknaming practice because of the value that such a practice brings to the societies concerned. It is also recommended that Vatsonga onomasticians proceeds to explore some other yet to be explored dimensions of naming so as to enrich and develop their language. Such endeavour will unveil a bold step in instilling, among the new generations, the value and relevance of Xitsonga names in the current dispensation.

VI. CONCLUSION

Consequently, this paper detailed some Tsonga self-given nicknames and how these name carry critical semantic significance for their bearers,

who also pose as the name givers. Such names also has a lot of benefit to the very societies in which they are used since their analysis reveals some important information regarding both the named and the communities in which they are found. Thus the significance of the study is well positioned in that the information portrayed therein will be of great help to the Tsonga people on how names, and especially nicknames are sometimes given, as well as their relevance and motives that have driven the name givers into such socio-linguistic creations. Thus, it is vital to mention that this addition to the critical onomastic board of knowledge will serve go a long way in fledging both the Tsonga research archives and the general scope of academia, particularly along the general onomastic global continuum.

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