

## Morpho-syntactic decomposition of place names in proximate sister languages: Gichuka, Gikuyu, Kiimenti and Kiembu

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### Abstract

This study sought to make a morpho-syntactic decomposition of place names in the proximate sister languages, Gikuyu, Kiembu, Gichuka and Kiimenti, with a view to analysing their structural constituents. The study utilised a descriptive research design underpinned by Filmore's Frame Semantics. Primary data was collected from a sample of twenty informants, five from a cognate set of words drawn from each category of Gichuka, Gikuyu, Kiembu and Kiimenti speakers using a judgmental sampling technique. A list of sixty-four names, sixteen in each of the languages, four from each category of place names that were selected purposively, were analysed. Results indicate that toponyms can be categorised into morpho-syntactic complexes with a rich myriad of meaning applications in several contexts structurally classified as simple, affixed, compound and complex, with a reflection of historically, culturally and environmentally inspired morphological and semantic content. Place names and linguistics are inseparable, considering the fact that their coinage is consciously done, constituting linguistic processes in the interactive components of grammar: morphology, phonology, syntax and semantics. The derived complexes reveal a rich myriad of applications in several contexts. In view of this observation, place names in this paper have been analysed as one category of nominals within morphology. The results of the study are expected to benefit scholars in applied Linguistics and the general public.

**Key terms:** Cognate, onomastics, semantics, sister languages, toponyms.

## INTRODUCTION

Linguistically, toponyms are morpho-syntactically derived complexes that show denotational or connotational meanings. Toponyms can be analysed on several word formation perspectives ranging from morphological, morpho-phonological and concatenation and related processes of inflection, derivation, affixation, compounding and reduplication.

Several studies on place names exist within onomastics. Xodjayeva and Murodova (2023) studied toponyms in English and came up with two morphological classifications of toponyms as simple and complex, classifying affixed as toponyms. This study notes that English, being an analytic language, does not capture a chain of morphemes within a word the way Gichuka, Gikuyu, Kiambu and Kiiminti do. This is because, unlike in English, the sister languages captured above are agglutinative in nature.

Helleland et al. (2012) note that when names are created, morphological structures are put into consideration, whether inflectional or derivational. However, they only analyse place names morphologically, without emphasis on the names semantic content.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Marjie-Okyere (2015) points out that toponyms, just like other words, exist in a language and are supposed to have some form of word formation patterns. Moreover, they are not given arbitrarily but bear meanings, whether denotational or connotational. This is also confirmed by Cruise (2011). Yule (2006) focuses on conventional word meanings and notes that in denotational meaning, for instance, members of a speech community apply the rules of use between the name and the object denoted by it.

It is common knowledge that names are pointers of entities. Trask (2007) notes that they denote a thing, a place or a person. However, on evaluations of the motivations in toponyms, this study asserts that there is more to toponyms than just denotation. They arouse people's attitudes, opinions and biases coupled with emotions. Whether a place name is linguistically derived, complex, complex or simple, place names,

just like other lexical items, have semantic significance in the language in which it is used. The complexly derived have meanings in their morphemes and compounds, while simplexes are treated as roots.

There are various meanings of words in a language, and together, they combine to form a wider perspective in real-time communication by the communicator(s). Toponyms or place names have received relatively little attention in theoretical literature (Anderson, 2007; Kohnlein, 2015). A study of the structure of toponyms in Gikuyu, Kiambu, Gichuka and Kiiminti was an attempt to reveal the richness and structural composition of these proximate sister languages.

Results of the study indicate that common morphological processes that underlie the sets of toponyms from Gikuyu, Kiambu, Kiiminti and Kiambu are connected to their syntactic distribution and semantic interpretation. The objective of this study was to make a morpho-syntactic analysis of toponyms in proximate sister languages: Gichuka, Kiiminti, Kiambu and Gikuyu.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative design and, in particular, a descriptive approach. In this approach, the state of affairs is described and reported as it is (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). Twenty participants (five from each language, Gikuyu, Kiambu, Kiiminti and Gichuka) of ages above 50 were selected on a judgmental basis. This age as a criterion was considered with an assumption that it is well-versed with most place names, their meanings and history, having witnessed and observed most of the social-cultural lives of the linguistic community. Besides, they are less likely to be affected by other linguistic or extra-linguistic factors, unlike those in lower brackets. A list of sixty-four place names, sixteen from each language and four from each category, were purposively selected based on the desired characteristics in line with Mugenda and Mugenda (1999). The selected sample comprised place names with morpho-semantic productivity in the four categories identified as simple, affixed, compound and complex.

To ensure more valid conclusions, multiple data collection tools (mixed method) were adopted. Oral and semi-structured interview methods provided more flexibility as the respondents were free to answer the questions in their own way. The participants, upon consent, were subjected to oral and semi-structured interviews and asked to give any four place names specifying their etymological basis, if any, their meanings now and in the past and what significance the name has to their community. After each session lasting for about three hours (30 minutes for each respondent), there was a plenary session for another 3 hours to make a common discussion on all the words. A small token of kshs. 1000 was given to each respondent on top of snacks and meals. Data was interpreted by both the participants and the researcher but analysed exclusively by the researcher, according to the objective, showing morpho-semantics and typology in toponymy and how place names have been interpreted in the languages.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### Linguistics in Toponymy

The results of this study reveal toponyms which have been categorised as simple, affixed, compound and complex expansions, as discussed below. Toponyms are created through a protracted multi-stage procedure, as noted by Xodjayeva and Murodova (2023). A closer look at toponyms in the considered languages points out four morpho-syntactic categorisations into which they can be classified: simple, affixed, compound and complex.

#### Simple Toponymy

Simple place names in the context of this study have been taken as words consisting of only one constituent with one base. The simplicity may be a result of compositionality or simplification. Since simple toponyms have no evidence of derivation, it is believed they were given as either motivated by the surrounding environment or after names of people. The motivation for simple naming system in place names was not established. Table 1 illustrates simple toponyms in Gikuyu, Gichuka, Kiimenti and Kiambu.

Table 1: Simple Toponyms in Proximate Sister Languages

S/N	Gikuyu	Kiimenti	Gichuka	Kiambu
1.	Njumbi	Nkubu	Chuka	Embu
2.	Ng'araria	Giaki	Mbugi	Kanja
3.	Kiranga	Chaaria	Ceera	Kware
4.	Ruchu	Maabi	Nkugwe	
5.	ndunduri	Ikwita	Mugwe	

Simple toponyms are unanalysable and uninterruptible units consisting of one morpheme. Amvela (2007:60) provides that a word with only one morpheme is simple, and if there are more, they are considered complex. This paper, however, treats affixed toponyms not as complex since there are words in these languages that are comprised of more than two words. Toponyms with morpheme affixations have, therefore, been considered affixed toponyms.

#### Affixed Toponymy

Studies in morphology are concerned with the internal structures of words and speakers' intuitive knowledge of how and when to inflect and derive them. Toponyms as words, just like other words, may comprise one or more morphemes that contribute to the meaning of the whole word.

Affixed toponyms are based on the fact that they comprise more than one morpheme in a distinct order since words have fixed orders, and the orders can only

be changed outside the words in order to avoid odd structures. Languages classified as synthetic include fusional, inflectional, polysynthetic and agglutinative, to which the sister languages of this study belong. This way, they delight in affixations in three ways: pre-prefixation, pre-fixation and suffixation.

Affixation Toponymy, through pre-fixation and pre-pre-fixation, uses noun class prefixes since toponyms are nouns. This way, one can point out the classes both before and after affixation. The toponyms are then analysed into morphemes and their meanings. Consider the name *Kangutu* (place of gossip/idle talk) in Gichuka. *Ka* is a diminutive bound morpheme deriving a diminutive toponym (class 12) from *ngutu* (class 9). In pre-pre-fixation, an affix is prefixed to an already existing class prefix. The pre-fixed affix determines the toponym class. The toponym *Ka-mu-nyaka* (a place of luck) exemplifies this scenario in Gikuyu.

Suffixation on the other hand utilises enclitics; *-ri-* (E), *-ne-* (I), *-ini-* (G) and *-ni-* (C) in toponymy. Toponyms such as *Kathituni* (place with a small forest) in Gichuka, *Mutunduri* (place of mitundu trees) in Kiambu, *Irimbene* (place of giant stones) in Kiimenti and *Mugaa-ini* (place of acacia trees) in Gikuyu have been derived this way. In affixed toponymy, words suggest a linguistic system within the languages that guide their formation; hence, the toponyms can undergo morphological analysis. The prefixes and suffixes are bound morphemes attached to a free one, otherwise referred to as roots, to create stems.

## Compound Toponymy

Compounding takes place in two ways: either there are two separate words or one word made of two words that are not separated. They may belong to the same or different word classes. A toponym such as *igwamiti* (place of falling trees) is a single-word compound made up of the verb *igwa* (fall) and noun *miti* (trees). On the other hand, *Kagwa Mpungu* (place of vultures) is a separate word compound made up of the verb *kagwa* (fall) and *mpungu* (vultures). Besides verbs and nouns, compound toponyms can also be formed from nouns and adjectives and nouns and nouns. A toponym like *Miriga Mieru* (a place of mixed clans/tribes), for instance, is derived from a

combination of a noun (*miiriga*) and an adjective (*mieru*). Table 2 illustrates examples of more compound toponyms together with their constituents.

## Complex Toponyms

Combining more than two constituents to create a place name results in a complex. This category takes complex toponyms differently from most other studies that consider complexity in terms of morphemes. In the context of this study, complexity is defined in terms of words; thus, a complex toponym comprises more than two words, including possessors and prepositions. All the constituents contribute to the meaning of the whole. Words such as *Mutiini wa Ngai* (tree of God) in Gikuyu, *Karima ka Mwendwa* (lover's hill) in Gichuka and *Muti o Kiama Muthangene* (unknown meaning) in Kiimenti and *Imeria ria Andu* (a place of no return) in Kiambu fall into this category.

Place names are proper nouns and are chosen and/coined deliberately based on the speaker's judgments about their appropriateness and acceptability. There is, therefore, a systematic way of place naming depending on people and their culture. Data obtained from Gichuka, Gikuyu, Kiimenti and Kiambu indicate that there are several categories of word expansion processes, as discussed below.

## Morphological Structure

Place names among the sister languages are derived by affixation, both pre-fixation and suffixation. Pre-fixation, just like in other nouns, delights in the use of noun class prefixes while suffixation utilises enclitics: *-ri-* (E), *-ne-* (I), *-ini-* (G) and *-ni-* (C). Derivation of diminutive, augmentative and derogative toponyms is a case of pre-pre-fixation since the deriving affix is added to a noun that is already pre-fixed inherently. Consider *Kamunyaka* (a place of luck) in Gikuyu.

(1) *ka-mu-nyaka* (a place of luck)  
12 3 luck

The diminutive prefix *ka* at class 12 does not replace the inherent prefix *-mu-* at class 3; instead, they adhere together. This is a case of pre-pre-fixation unlike in others that either swoop or replace classes altogether, as in an inflection like *munyaka-minyaka* (luck-lucks).

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In other instances, prefixes and suffixes may derive a toponym together following agglutinativity of languages of the Niger-Congo origin (Good, 2005), to which languages of this study belong. When this happens, each affix takes its rightful position-prefix and suffix, hence may not be mistaken for infixation.

In fact, Eastern Bantu roots are uninteruptable. Table 2 shows some toponyms derived/inflected morphologically. A numeral indicates the nominal class, while the letter indicates the language as G (Gikuyu), E (Kiambu), C (Gichuka) and I (Kiimenti).

**Table 2: Morphological Toponyms in Gichuka, Gikuyu, Kiimenti and Kiambu**

Toponym	Language	Units	Gloss
Kangutu	Gichuka	ka-ngutu 12 gossip	Place of gossip
Karingani	Gichuka	ka-ringa-ni 12 miringa trees encl.	place of miring trees
Kiaibiu	Gichuka	ki-a-i-biu 7..8 swords	Place of swords/ war
Mutunduri	Kiambu	Mu-tundu-ri 3 mutundu tree encl.	Place of Mutundu tree
Kathangariri	Kiambu	Ka-thangari-ri 12 coach grass encl.	Place with Couch grass
Kianjokoma	Kiambu	Ki-a-njokoma 7... club	Place of clubs/war
Kamunyaka	Gikuyu	Ka-mu-nyaka 12 3 luck	Place of luck
Kangari	Gikuyu	Ka-ngari 12 leopard	Place of leopards
Mutundu-ini	Gikuyu	Mu-tundu-ini 3 mutundu tree encl.	Place of Mutundu tree
Irindiro	Kiimenti	I-rind-i-ro	Place of hiding



		6 hide...	
Abothuguci	Kiiminti	A-bothuguci 1 Bothuguci clan	inhabited by people of Bothuguchi clan
Kithaene	Kiiminti	Ki-thaa-ene 7 stinging nettle encl.	place of Stinging nettle

### Morpho-phonology

Sound changes in any linguistic construction are factual, systematic and predictable, which is also the case in toponym derivation in Gikuyu, Kiiminti, Gichuka and Kiambu. Assimilation and dissimilation, deletion, glide formation, coalescence, hardening, weakening and strengthening have been witnessed. These morpho-phonological operations in toponym derivation range from consonantal to vocalic. Vowels may merge into a completely different vowel in a process called **vowel coalescence**. Toponyms such as *Irimbene* (place of reeds) and *Mbirirene* (place of giant stones) in Kiiminti have been derived by merging /a/ and /e/ into /e/. The words would therefore be *irimbaene* and *Mbiriraene* respectively.

In **glide formation** at (2), a lower vowel precedes a non-round back vowel. The resultant is a labio-velar glide /w/ as in; u+a}/w/. Such applies in formation of toponyms such as;

- (2). Kirwiro [kiruiro] - (Kiiminti) A battleground.  
 Mutindwa [mutindua] - (Kiiminti) An idling place/a place of passing time.  
 Kivwe [kivue] - (Kiambu) A place of foxes.  
 Mugwe [mugue] - (Gichuka) .....  
 Rware [ruare] - (Gichuka) Lowland/Valley.

*Gaciongo* (I) (place of the skulls), *mutindwa* (I) (an idling place/a place of pastime) and *Gicerori* (E) (execution area) exhibit **dissimilatory processes**. A voiced consonant prefix precedes a voiceless root consonant and vice versa. /c/ follows /g/ in *gaciongo*, /t/

follows /m/ in *Mutindwa* and /c/ follows /g/ in *Gicerori*. The older generation prefers referring to *Gaciongo* as *Kajiongo*, and the rules apply. The voiceless prefix consonant /k/ would then precede the voiceless root consonant /j/.

Assimilation and dissimilation are usually motivated by Darl's Law by Katamba (1989), with a motivation of easing articulation. Speakers of the languages would find it cumbersome to refer to the toponyms as \**Gajiongo*, \**Mudindwa* and \**Ginjerori* as would be the case without assimilation-dissimilation. These sound changes point out that morpho-phonology in toponym derivation in Kiambu, Kiiminti, Gikuyu and Gichuka cannot be downplayed.

### Concatenation

This involves toponyms arrived at by a combination of strings through compounding, acronyms and reduplication. No toponym was found in this study from acronyms, though reduplicated and compounds were. In Gichuka, for instance, there is a partially reduplicated toponym *Mukuthuku* (place of *mikuthuku* trees). The combining constituents in compound toponyms may belong to the same word class or different, maybe separate words such as *Kagwa Mpungu* (place of vultures) or joined such as *igwamiti* (place of falling trees) in Kiiminti or *ituramiro* (place of chopping sticks) in Gikuyu. Table 3 shows examples of compound toponyms and their deriving constituent classes.

**Table 3: Compound Toponyms and Constituent Classes**

Constituent Class	Toponym (Example)	Language	Gloss
verb + noun	Kagwa Mpungu	Kiimenti	place of vultures
noun + noun	Ndunyu Chege	Gikuyu	Chege Market
verb + noun	Igamba Ngombe	Gichuka	place of mowing cows
Adj + adj	Gaiti Kanene	Kiimenti	far East
noun + noun	Kihiu Mwiri	Gikuyu	sword in the body
Noun + adj	Mwitu Mwiru	Kiimenti	dark forest
noun + adj	Miriga Mieru	Kiimenti	a place of mixed clans
verb + noun	Igwamiti	Kiimenti	place of falling trees
verb+noun	ituramiro	Gikuyu	place of chopping sticks

## Borrowing

Linguistic borrowing entails taking a construction or an item from the loaner and nativising it into the loanee in order to suit the linguistic needs of the loanee. Foreign toponyms indicate some influence of the loaner, be it a prominent person who does or did not belong to the linguistic community or an activity with affective values to the community at the time of naming. It could also be a phenomenon not natively known to the linguistic community. The examples in (3) show borrowing and nativisation.

(3). *Makenji* (Mckenzie) - (Gikuyu) (named after a British Director of Kenya Cannery (Delmonte-Kenya).

*Kware* (Quarry) - (Gikuyu) (An area near what is believed to have been a mine (quarry).

*Ikwita* (Equator) - (Kiimenti) (An area believed to be through where the imaginary (Equator) passes.

*Kiraca* (Crusher) - (Kiembu) (named after an activity (crushing) of ballast for the construction of Thuci-Nkubu Road.

Nativisation aids in the ease of pronunciation of foreign words, which might prove difficult for the native linguistic community.

## Meaning in Toponyms

It is common knowledge that names are pointers of entities. Trask (2007) notes that they denote a thing, a place or a person; however, on evaluation of the motivations in toponyms, this study asserts that there is more to toponyms than just denotation. They arouse people's attitudes, opinions and biases coupled with emotions. Whether a place name is linguistically derived, complex or simple, place names, just like other lexical items, have semantic significance in the language in which it is used. The complexly derived have meanings in their morphemes and compounds, while simplex are treated as roots. There are various meanings of words in a language, and together, they combine to form a wider perspective in real-time

communication by being communicator(s). In this study, toponymy meaning has been categorised into two, broadly as conceptual, denotative, referential, connotative and affective, summarised as conceptual-referential and connotative-affective.

## Conceptual-referential

There is a connection between a linguistic expression and an object or concept in the real world. Place names refer to real persons or places that either exist or existed. We can, therefore, say that concepts denote particular referents. *Mackenzi* (Mackenzi), *Ndunyu Chege* (place named after Chege) and *gwa Charagu* (Charagu's place) in Gikuyu, for instance, are names of particular persons known in history.

## Connotative-affective

Leech (1982) posits that a place name may evoke varying thoughts depending on the age, gender, history and experience of the hearer. During fieldwork, an eighty-year-old shed a tear as he explained the place named *Gicerori* (Place of execution) and how the executions were carried out on criminals, what he called 'evia.' While it arouses such strong emotions in an elder, it evokes nothing in an ordinary thirty-year-old youth. The affective meanings may evoke feelings of nostalgia or melancholy depending on what it is associated with and comes out through attitudes, biases, tone and emotions based on personal experiences. Example

(10) enlists some place names with connotative-affective meanings.

(10) *Gicerori* (E) - Place of execution

*Kirirwa* (I/G) - Place of feasting

*Kangutu* (C) - Place of cheap talk

*Kieni* (I) - Open space for public functions

*Gaciongo* (I) - Burial site

*Muti-ini wa Ngai* (G) - Tree of God (A mugumo tree associated with oathing and sacrificing in the African Traditional Religion)

## CONCLUSION

The growing interest in and support of renaming places is a testimony to the importance of place names to a community. Names not only carry the identity and political aspirations of a people but also carry with them their knowledge systems. This study has demonstrated this reality from the assorted names drawn from sister languages Gikuyu, Kiiminti, Gichuka and Kiambu, which embody the cultural milieu of what is referred to as Mount Kenya bantu. Besides, cognates in Gikuyu, Kiambu, Gichuka and Kiiminti are quite similar and sometimes even identical in spelling, pronunciation and/or meaning. Some are identical in all ways and can constitute "perfect cognates." This study has established that the root may be identical, but the prefixial or suffixal endings may be different among the sisters in form but not in meaning. Place naming is consciously done, and as nouns, their formation delights in linguistic aspects.

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