Critiquing the meaningfulness of Sukuma Cattle names: A non-Philosophical semantic stance

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Abstract
The article critiques the meaningfulness of Sukuma cow names as the answer to theoretical contribution within the frameworks of linguists and philosophy in assessing the semantics of cattle names. The exertion used Descriptive, Indirect Reference and Onomastics Theories. The former describes names as identical to the objects' descriptions; the latter indicates that names are more than simply the object to which they refer. The last refers to the theory, which shows the origin of names they came from. The study used structured interviews with 4 sukuma speakers from Mwamashimba village of Tanzania who were selected purposively via snowballing technique. It was found that *Lunya, Nyankole, Mabhú, Mkala, and Shilungu* are Sukuma cow names whose meaning is meaningless as they have no symbiotic relations with the semantic content, they refer to rather than just labelling of objects, places, colour and structure. Based on the findings, it was concluded that Sukuma cow names are meaningless and not rigid designators as claimed in the philosophy of language rather than identification labels, which are very important in any speech community in stirring emotion, cultural awareness as well and historical connection between the present and the past.

Introduction

A name is a word or phrase that identifies a specific person, place or thing (Crystal, 1997:112). If this definition is true, does the name fit naturally to what is presented? Does this question make linguists fail to quench the satisfaction of meaningful or meaningless names? The question of the meaningless and meaningfulness of names has attracted attention in the twentieth century. Those who argue for the former say that names are just labels and fashions (Cf. Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1981; Brennen, 2000) to mention just but a few. Those who argue for the latter say that names reflect socio-cultural, religious manifestations and other historical events in people's lives.

This paper describes the semantics of Sukuma cow names based on two specific objectives: names of Sukuma cow names and their construal origins and meaningfulness or meaninglessness. The aim is to preserve cow cultural names' meaning and the practical functions of these names in the Sukuma community. Studies in African cows have been done by scholars such as Adido & Gicheha (2018), Mustefa, et al. (2023), Ayele (2019), Okeyo, Olivier, Young-Jun and Seoae (2015), to mention just but a few, but none have discussed indigenous cow names. Specifically, in Kisukuma speech communities of the United Republic of Tanzania, few studies on Sukuma names have been done, as in Shigini (2022) and Thomas (2015). However, none of them paid attention to Sukuma cow names. Still, Sukuma cows seem to be embedded in their products apart from cultural practices connected through their names. Thus, this has motivated the current investigations to see whether Sukuma cow names are

meaningful or meaningless. This would clarify a long tradition argument to linguists and language philosophers. The former agree that names are meaningless, while the latter argue that names are logically rigid designators (Cf. Kripke 1980) and hence meaningful.

Mustefa, et al. (2023) investigated the phenotypic diversity between and within Harar and Ogaden cattle breeds in eastern Ethiopia. Their research recorded fourteen morphological and eight morphometric traits on 456 adult cattle (354 cows and 102 oxen) from 5 purposively selected districts to characterise the cattle populations in eastern Ethiopia. It was found that the Harar cattle were characterised by their forward-oriented, widely spaced, and medium-length horns, while the Ogaden cattle possessed upright-oriented, narrowly spaced, short horns. The study also showed that most Ogaden cattle had grey body colours while the Harar cattle had multiple body colours, with red combined with white and black observed frequently. Most of the morphometric measurement values were higher for the oxen, while the cows had long horns.

Moreover, Ogaden cattle had higher morphometric parameters than Harar cattle. These scholars exhausted much on cows' morphological features, including colours, but not their names. Thus, this grounds the current study to fill this gap by investigating cow names and their associated connotation as to whether they are meaningful or meaningless.

Ayele (2019) investigated by assessing local cows' reproductive and productive performances under farmers' management in Soro District, Hadiya Zone, Southern Ethiopia. Ayele's research found that shortage of feed and water, diseases, recurrent draught, infrastructures and other constraints like land shortage, low capital, and shortage of extension services were major cattle production constraints. The study concluded that introducing improved forages and properly utilising crop residues should be emphasised to improve the reproductive and productive performances of cattle production in the area. The present study further looks at indigenous cow names with emphasis on the Sukuma speech community of Tanzania to examine the meaningful or meaningless cow names, the origin, and the practical functions of these names in Sukuma land.

Regarding animal names and cows particularly, Thomas (2015) investigated a study on using animals as traditional medicine by the Sukuma Tribe of Busega District in North-western Tanzania. His study found that 42 various animal species were used for nearly 30 different medicinal purposes, including STD, stoppage of bleeding, reproductive disorders, asthma, weakness, tuberculosis, cough, paralysis and wounds and for other religious beliefs. Animals used by the Sukuma tribe for treatment comprised seventeen mammals, seven birds, four reptiles, eight arthropods and two molluscs. Thoma's study contributed to understanding the use of animals as traditional medicine sources in the Sukuma communities of Tanzania. The present study investigates Sukuma cow names, functions and whether they are meaningful or meaningless. This would contribute to understanding that names are not designated on one and only one definite object as it has been claimed in philosophical language (Cf. Frege, 1966, p. 54). This is a very important link of language and culture as part and parcel of linguistics anthropology.

Shigini (2015) researched Sukuma names but focused on the semantic nature of Sukuma personal names. Shigini's study aimed to describe the content embodied in Sukuma names that parents give their children under the social learning and agenda-setting theories. It was found that some of the names given to children are loaded with contents reflecting parents' experiences before or during pregnancy and even at birth. For that matter, names mean potential, and in assigning names to their children, parents bear in mind a purpose which may be influenced by some good or bad life experiences, such as world events, problems, happiness, time, day or reason as well as names denoting failure or success. The present study concentrates on cow Sukuma names. This area has attracted no

interest from linguists to see whether cow names are embedded in socio-cultural practices of meaning or are just bear names. Such discussion would be useful to the traditional inquiry of both linguists' (Cf. Anderson, 2007) treatment of semantic names and the philosophers' interest (Cf. Ullmann 1962: 77) in what names are being denoted to both speakers' and hearers' mind and in the real world and how does that process of denotation function.

The paper used three theories: descriptive or Mediate Reference Theory, Indirect theory of reference and Onomastics Theory. Descriptive Theory or Descriptive Theory of Reference is the theory which was propounded by Frege (1892, 1918) and Russel (1905, 1917), also known as the Frege-Russell view (Cf. Saul, 1972). The theory states that the meaning or semantic content of proper names is identical to the descriptions associated with them by speakers, while their referents are determined to be the objects that satisfy these descriptions.

Descriptive Theories have tried to eliminate certain logical contradictions if the names were considered definite descriptions. Kripke (1980) rejected the validity of these Descriptive Theories by arguing that no unique description of identity is needed, identifying descriptions can be used even if the reference has not been correctly identified, and a description (as opposed to a name) cannot function as a rigid indicator.

The Descriptive Theory sees names as denoting an item only if they satisfy all or most of the descriptions or characteristics one associates with the item the name is supposed to represent (Kripke, 1980). From this base, speakers must also believe and intend to use the given name with the necessary denotation, including the necessary characteristics (Cf. Dobrić, 2010, p.32).

> 'N.N.' denotes x upon a particular occasion of its use by a speaker S just in case x is uniquely that which satisfies all or most of the descriptions 0 such that S would assent to 'N.N. is 0' (or 'That N.N. is 0'). Crudely: the cluster of information S has associated with the name determines its denotation upon a particular occasion by fit. If the speaker has no individuating information, he will denote nothing (Evans, 1973, p. 188).

From this account, Kripke sees names as rigid designations that have a causal connection to the items they name and foresees several different ways to name the same object regarding the fulfilment of the truth conditions. This causal or descriptive theory of reference can lead to several problems: names that do not refer; the chain may be interrupted, a reference change may occur, and so on. In addition, Kripke did not sufficiently explain what constitutes a "link" in the chain (Dobrić, 2010, p. 8).

Unlike Frege, Russell and Kripke (1980), Siobhan (2009) reshaped Descriptive or Mediated Reference Theory to Indirect Reference Theory, which was propounded by Siobhan (2009, p. 202) in the sense that apart from focusing on the direct relationship of meaning, it was associated with the indirect reference. In other words, the theory that posits that words refer to something in the external world but insists that there is more to the meaning of a name than simply the object to which it refers (Berozowski, 2001, p. 67).

Where applicable, 'Onomastics theory underpins the current study; onomastics is nothing but the study of the etymology, history and use of proper names. Thus, an *alethonym* (true name) or an *orthonym* (real name) is the proper name of the object in question, the object of onomastic study (Carsenat, 2013). In other words, the historical approach to onomastics uses an etymological methodology to describe the original meanings of proper names and their formal development over time. It is believed that the origin of onomastic should be sought in ancient Egypt 5-6 thousand years ago. It was them who had first made a distinction between proper names and common nouns by

inserting their gods' and pharaohs' names in frames or "name rings" (cartouche) and, later, writing them in red paint on Papyrus (Mberwa1 & Tibategeza, 2022, p. 228-229).

Methodology

The article used a case study design conducted in the Mwanza region and Kwimba district of Tanzania. The paper used a qualitative research approach in which words and phrases were used in describing cattle names pertinent to their colour, structure, origin and the function of cows in the Sukuma speech community. An unstructured interview was the instrument of data collection, which was applied in two sections, morning and evening. Purposive sampling was applied to select three native (4) Sukuma informants, two of whom were cattle keepers (goat, ship, and cows), and the rest were traditional healers. Snowballing sampling technique was used whereby after interviewing one of the three, she made the researcher reach others at Mwamashimba village of Kwimba district in Mwanza region of Tanzania. The researcher used a notebook to jot down field notes and a voice recorder to record the information during the interview section. After data collection, analysis was done thematically, using words, phrases, and sentences under the guidance of Mediate Reference, Indirect theory of reference and Onomastics Theories.

Sukuma Cow names

Lunya: This is the cow's name found in Sukuma speech communities of the Northwestern part of Tanzania. It belongs to the cow whose skin looks as if it has been rained or watered by water. This kind of cow can have different colours, but its skin and feathers should look like they were wetted by water. See Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Lunya

The cow's skin in Figure 1 looks like it has been rained on. The term *lunya* is associated with negative feelings of the speakers because, in these communities, the word comes from the term *nya* 'defecate' or *kunya* 'to defecate'. This is justified in the Mediated Reference Theory (Cf. Siobhan, 2009, p. 202), which posits that words refer to something in the external world; it is to say the name has more than senses than simply the object to which it refers.

Nyankole: This is the cow's name found in Sukuma speech communities of Tanzania. This kind of cow is said to have originated from the ethnic group in Uganda in the area known as Banyankole or Ankole. The area is between Lake Edward and George and the Tanzania border in southwestern Uganda. See Figure 2:

Figure: 2 Nyankole

The cow in Figure 2 is known as Nyankole; it has long horns and a big morphological body structure compared to other cows in the Sukuma speech community. Sukuma speech communities prefer cow breeding with Nyankole as they have a big body structure; they do so in favour of beef, agriculture, and trade activities on Sukuma land. Nyankole, as the name of Sukuma speakers, is accountered within the Onomastics theory, which articulates the origin of the certain name. That is to say, the approach describes the original meanings of proper names.

Shilungu: Like in Sukuma goat names, Shilungu is also applied to cow names whose colour is two, namely black and white. This cow should have a white colour to its face, and another part of its body is black. See the sample in figure 3 below:

Figure 3: Shilungu

Men use this cow in Figure 3 to call ancestors; for the case of women, they use female cows to call ancestors ready to solve challenges in the Sukuma speech community.

Yapi: The cow is traditionally used for bringing rainfall in Sukuma speech communities, especially in the Nela area at the border of the Shinyanga and Mwanza regions, both found in Tanzania. The Sukuma term *Yapi* means black in the English language. Therefore, it is the cow whose name reflects its colour. See Figure 4 below:

Figure 4: Yapi

Figure 4 shows the cow whose colour is black. Traditionally, Sukuma people use it in different contexts. For instance, when a Sukuma chief dies,   Yapi cow skin is used to cover the dead body of the chief during the burial. Note that the cow is not slaughtered by knife but is hanged until it dies. Thus, its skin qualifies to cover the dead chief.   The name of this cow concurs with the Descriptive Theory of Reference (Cf. Saul, 1972), which justifies that the meaning of the names is identical to the description associated with the speakers while the satisfaction of descriptions determines their referent. In other words, the black colour is named depending on the colour it possesses.

Mabhú: Mabhú is the cow's name found in Sukuma speech communities of the United Republic of Tanzania. The term *Mabhú* means ashes in the English language. Therefore, the factor that triggers the appearance of this name is colouration, whereby the cow's colour is like the colour of ashes. Consider figure 5 below:

Figure 5: Mabhú

The cow in Figure five (5) has a colour similar to *ashes*; this is the base for the cow's name assigners in Sukuma speech communities of Tanzania. Our fundamental question is: does the meaning of the name (reference) imply the meaning of the referent (cow)? The paper will, in turn, respond to this question view shortly in the discussion section.

Mkala: Mkala is another Sukuma cow name in Sukuma of Tanzania. *Mkala* comes from the noun *ikala* 'charcoal' or *makala* 'charcoals'. But the -*m*- prefix for *Mkala* does not imply black colour like charcoal; it implies partial black like charcoal and snuff. Therefore, *Mkala*, like in Mabhú, colouration is why the

Sukuma people obtained the name of this cow. The cow's colour is partially black, like charcoal and snuff. See Figure 6 below:

Figure 6: Mkala

Discussion of the findings

The fundamental discussion of the nature of names in language has always taken place within the frameworks of philosophy, which argues that names have meaning in people's minds (Cf. Kripke, 1972 & Evans, 1973). Still, linguists are concerned that names have no meaning other than performing the function of denotation or just identification marks (Ullmann, 1962: 77). From this base, this section dwells its discussion on whether Sukuma cow names are meaningful or meaningless. The debate on the meaning of names has been observed in various kinds of literature (Crystal, 1995; Ullmann, 1962; Saeed, 2003; Brennen, 2000), to mention just but a few, which has attracted the attention of Semantics.

The meaning of Lunya: Regarding the meaning of the word *Lunya*, which is derived from the verb nya 'defecate' or kunya 'to defecate', when compared to the characteristics of the cow or the physical appearance of the cows, there is no matching between the name Lunya and the cow itself. This means that Luna is just the name with no significant referent. This idea dwells with Ullmann (1962, p. 67), who believed that names are just labels and merely identification; they are meaningless and pertinent to the referent objects. This takes Saeed (2003) and Brennen (2000), who argue that the question to be asked is whether labels are always meaningless and whether the fact that those labels stand for something is a meaningless idea. Thus, it can be argued that sometimes names bear no resemblance to the characteristics of the bearers; this makes them meaningless of names. Therefore, *Lunya* as one of the Sukuma cow names is meaningless. It is just the fashion of identification. It is in this context even the Descriptive Theory which claim the name of anything should satisfy its description fail, for instance Kripke (1980)'s claim that 'the sense of a name is the object it refers to, and the referent of a name is determined by a causal link between a kind of "baptism" and subsequent statements' does not embrace connection with the nature of names of this kind.

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The meaning of Nyankole: It has been presented that *Nyankole* is one of the Sukuma cow names found in Sukuma speech communities. The names are associated with cows found in the southwestern part of Uganda called Ankole, and the people there are known as Banyankole. The name being associated with the geographical area does not imply that the meaning of the area is a real meaning of or the semantic content of the object. This makes meaningless names which bear areas. For instance, Nyankole are Bantu-speaking people of the Kingdom of Ankole of Uganda who originated from Congo. Thus, Nyankole as the cow does not indicate proper features in Banyankole-speaking people. That is why the same cow, when found in Uganda, is not known as Nyankole; if found in Congo, Nigeria, etc, it is not known as Nyankole as it possesses different names. This base can be interesting in the discussion of Crystal (1995, p. 150), who thought that change in meaning patterns appears to motivate some groups of scholars to say names are meaningless. There is no doubt about finding other names for the same object; this justifies meaningless names and even personal names. That is why Mill, as quoted in Sfetcu (2019, p. 3), argued that (proper) names are the only names of objects that are not connotative and do not have a strict meaning.

The meaning of Yapi: It has been argued that *Ya-pi* means black or *of black* in Sukuma speech communities. It can be a cow (ya-pi or ja-pi), the person (wa-pi or bha-pi), goat (ya-pi or ja-pi), rate (ya-pi or ja-pi), and charcoal (la-pi or ga-pi), tree (la-pi or ga-pi) to mention just but a few. In the Sukuma language, ya-, la-, and ka- are some of the prefixes representing singulars and ga, bha, ja, etc., are some of the plurality prefixes. The name reflects the physical appearance of the bearer object; in other words, the colour justifies the name of the cow. The importance here is that names are identifications in the language but not speech. If a person is asked to bring something **black**, he or she will not bring something red, white, yellow, green or blue, but he or she will bring something with a *black* colour. That is why names are just identification marks (Cf. Ullmann, 1962), which becomes important in treating the meaning of the name but does not reflect what is contained in the names as its original meaning. It must be noted that within the scope of Semantics, most linguists have agreed early on in the discussion that names do not have meaning but only perform the function of denoting items, places, and features, to name a few (Anderson 2007: 276) and lose all elements of usage becoming institutionalised.

The meaning of *Mabhú* is questionable pertinent meaningfulness whether person, tree or cow name. Ashes come from burnt trees, stones, timbers, and glass, to mention just a few, but the cow does not come from burning those materials; this may trigger us to think that the name does not reflect the sense it represents, hence fashion. However, in the relationship angle, the meaning of the name is indeed just an identification of something because the meaning of reference is not contained in the meaning of referent. This calls against scholars who argue that names are meaningful (Cf. Al-Zumor, 2009), who believe that names are meaningful as they reflect people's values, circumstances, objects, traditions, etc. This argument is questionable and pertinent to names like Mabhú, whereby what is contained in ashes does not reflect what is contained in *cows*. Still, identification matters in either human or inhuman names. With the point of identification and philosophical stance, Kripke, quoted in Dobrić (2010:33), sees names have a causal connection to the items they name and foresees several different ways to name the same object regarding the fulfilment of the truth conditions.

Conclusion
The paper has critiqued the meaningfulness of cattle names with emphasis on Sukuma cow names found in Tanzania and the factors for these names. The colour, etymology, and morphological make-up have been observed as factors triggering Sukuma people to name names, particularly cattle names. The observed cow names are Lunya, Nyankole, Yapi, Mabhú, Mkala and Shilungu. These names are

meaningless as they do not reflect the cows' senses. This is against language philosophers who argue that names have meaning because they have directly correlated with their nominatum and are rigid designators ensuring the same individual, object or things in every possible world of the natural things. However, the variation or change of names from one area to another and their function triggers meaningless cattle names rather than just identification in stirring emotion, cultural awareness to the present generations well, and historical connection between the present and the past.

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