

**Personal Naming  
among the Banasukuma:  
a Linguistic Analysis**

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*Peter Gongga Shighini\**

ORCID 0000-0001-5857-2421

*and*

*Gastor Mapunda*

ORCID: 0000-0001-5683-0175

**Abstract**

*The current paper investigated personal names in Kemunasukuma, a Sukuma language dialect spoken in Tanzania, from a linguistic perspective. It illuminates the meanings embedded in personal names. The study was carried out in rural parts of the Shinyanga Region which is one of the places where the language is spoken. Interview and focus group methods were employed in data collection, and the data were thereafter grouped into different emergent themes based on the categories of personal names in the dialect. The findings suggest that Sukuma personal names are significant linguistic forms attached with meanings that reflect diverse realities such as the circumstances at birth, time and place of birth, manner and order of birth, and parents' behaviours, among others. Moreover, personal names have denotative or connotative meanings depending on the factors that inspired their selection. We argue that Kemunasukuma indigenous names are useful labels used by name-givers to communicate different information to family members and the entire community.*

**Keywords:** *Banasukuma, Kemunasukuma dialect, linguistic analysis, personal naming, Shinyanga, Tanzania*

**Introduction**

One major discussion that has dominated semantics and onomastics, in particular, is the issue of meaning in personal names (henceforth PNs). PNs are “words that a person or an entity in the world is known by” (Abdul, 2014:1), or “words by which reality is known, expressed, and appreciated in every culture” (Kinegeni& Atieno, 2019:6). These definitions point to the fact that names are tools that people use to understand, communicate and embrace reality about individuals' lives, and are found in all cultures in the world. In this regard, Batoma

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\* **Corresponding author:**

Peter Gongga Shighini, Department of Human Capital Management and Administration, Moshi Co-operative University, P.O. Box 474, Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. Email: shiginipeter@gmail.com

(2020:194) regards names as “semiotic strings that can be composed of language signs such as words and sentences, or they might mimic a sound such as in the case of onomatopoeia.” These signs represent meaning about people’s lives which is only accessed by those who understand the language in which the signs are rooted. PNs are regarded by Ansu-Kyeremeh (2000:19) as channels of communication for supporting human interactions. Through naming, we can recognise, differentiate, and know people’s history, culture, and origin (Manyasa, 2009:1-2). Naming practices in most, if not all, African societies often mirror the sociocultural and ideological truths of these societies (Mashiri et al., 2013:163). This truism will systematically unfold itself in the present paper about PNs in Kemunasukuma (F21a), one of the four dialects of Sukuma<sup>6</sup> (F21) (cf. Maho, 2009:44).

Since scholars from diverse fields began to develop scholarly interests in PNs, there has been a lack of unanimity on whether names are meaningful or meaningless. Consequently, a two-sided debate has dominated the study of PNs. While scholars unanimously agree that names are universal aspects of all languages (cf. Al-Zumor, 2009; Bramwell, 2012; Mutunda, 2016), they differ on the meaning of names. On the one hand, some scholars (e.g., Brennen, 2000; Langendonck, 2007) believe that ‘names are meaningless’ and are mere labels for referring with. Scholars in this camp argue that names do not carry any meanings since the reference (the name) and the referent (the name bearer) may not necessarily share inherent qualities. This argument is grounded on referential theories, which focus on meaning in language (context-free language). The view that PNs are tags for referring echoes Western societies’ naming practices where the bestowal of names on children is mainly referential, not symbolic (Mutunda, 2016:76). Neethling (2003:56) supports the view that “name meaningfulness continues to differentiate the naming patterns in African societies from Western naming practices.” This means that names in western societies are simply labels for making references. In contrast, in African societies, names are symbols representing diverse aspects of the lives of their bearers and givers. Olatunji et al. (2015:76) concur with the view that an African name signifies a lot about an individual; it reflects one’s gender, personality, and sociocultural characteristics such as social class, religion, geographical location, and spiritual status.

On another note, other scholars (e.g., Al-Zumor, 2009; Agyekum, 2006) hold the view that ‘names are meaningful’ as they give insights into various aspects of their givers and bearers. Aspects such as circumstances surrounding one’s birth, parents’ hope and aspirations,

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<sup>6</sup> Other dialects of Sukuma are Kemunang’weeli (F21b), Kemunakūya (F21c), and Kemunadakama (F21d) (Maho, 2009:44).

place of origin, culture, and religion are reflected in the names that people bear. This argument is based on operational theories that focus on meaning in speech (language in context). Scholars researching African PNs subscribe to the latter view about names in African societies. African PNs are unique and meaningful, and Africans attach so much significance to the names they select and bestow on their children. Beside serving primarily as identity labels for people, Mashiri et al. (2013:168) posit that African PNs have meaning and are philosophical and socio-historical accounts that reflect, among others, the sociocultural, religious, and political values of the name-givers. Therefore, African parents or name-givers usually bestow, to newborns, names attached with something noteworthy relating to their cultures, ideologies, beliefs, experiences, worries, and hopes. Mutunda (2016:75) views PNs as the messages that name-givers communicate to society through their children's names. The 'message' expressed includes, but is not limited to, the relationships within families, events during pregnancy, circumstances at birth, parents' ideologies, cultures, aspirations, and belief systems. In short, an African name is similar to a text where we can read, among others, the history of a person or family in space and time (Mutunda, 2011:14).

PNs have been of central focus among scholars globally. Scholars from different parts of the world have worked on PNs. Examples of such scholars are Aljbour and Al-Haq (2019) - Indonesia, Tahat (2020) and Al-Sayyed (2021) - Jordan, Rahman (2013) - Pakistan, Abel et al. (2019) - Denmark, Devi (2018) - India, and Diao (2014) - USA. These studies allude that PNs have been studied with varied foci. Al-Zumor (2009) investigated the semantic, sociolinguistic, and morphological aspects of female PNs in the Yemeni community and noted that names are not arbitrary words devoid of meaning; almost all names are meaningful. Rahman (2013) examined the beliefs about PNs and naming practices in Pakistan to understand how names are associated with numerous societal variables such as power, belief system, and identity. Devi (2018) explored PNs in Khurkhul society in India. The study was based on the concept that there is a strong relationship between the community's cultural practice and the language spoken. Moreover, Tahat (2020) studied the structural patterns of Jordanian PNs and the processes involved in their formation, while Al-Sayyed (2021) explored the extent to which Jordanian PNs have a causal relationship with their usage. Also, other scholars like Bramwell (2012) conducted a cross-cultural investigation of the naming practices of several diverse communities in Scotland to find whether or not the naming systems of various immigrant and indigenous societies whose linguistic and social contexts differ enormously.

In Africa, numerous scholars have also shown interest in PNs; and studied PNs in different African languages. The studies include Hang'ombe (2015), who explored the morphology and semantics of Tonga-given names and nicknames. The paper reveals that Tonga-given names are derived mainly from verbs, common and proper nouns, and adjectives. The paper also shows Tonga PNs are attached in denotative and connotative meanings. This implies that PNs in different languages contain different types of meanings, and the types may vary between languages. Correspondingly, Exeudo et al. (2021) examined some Onitsha PNs' syntactic and morphological structures to ascertain the morphological processes and the relation in the morphemes' internal structures combined to form the names. The paper shows that Onitsha names are largely formed through three word-formation processes: prefixation, suffixation, and clipping. The results in Onitsha suggest that PNs are a product of diverse word-formation processes operating in a given language. Lungu (2019) investigated Namwanga PNs, focusing on their semantic and pragmatic meaning. The paper establishes that through naming, name-givers in Namwanga, perform some functions or acts, which include warning, reminding, apologising, and informing. Also, Mensah and Mekamgoum (2017) studied the communicative significance of Ngamba PNs. The paper reveals that Ngamba PNs represent not only individual or group identities and affiliations but also contain significant historical resonances and cultural beliefs that echo painful and rarely enjoyable personal memories, bright futures, and unresolved tension.

However, it is worth noting that understanding the meaning of a particular community's PNs is obligatory to understanding the culture, language, and context in which names are selected. Viriri (2019:39) concurs with argument that "African PNs have a high potent cultural content which makes them culture-specific." This assertion is backed by the frame semantics theory, whose central idea is that the meaning of a word can only be understood through having access to all the essential knowledge (in mind) related to that word (cf. Fillmore, 1982). Goddard (2011:78) argues, "The meaning of a word can only be understood against a background of frame of experience, beliefs, or practices that motivate the concept that the word encodes." It is against this observation by other scholars that this paper also pays attention to the semantics of Sukuma names, particularly in the Kemunasukuma dialect.

In Tanzania, home to about 150 community languages, the study of PNs and naming practices has also received considerable scholarly attention. Several studies have been conducted on the topic in different languages. The majority of these studies have involved individual languages, such

as Chasu (Msuya, 2021), Gogo (Chipalo, 2019), Haya (Buberwa, 2018), Datooga (Charwi, 2019), Pogolo (Lihundi, 2018), Nyakyusa (Lusekelo, 2018), and Matengo (Kapinga, 2020), among others. This suggests that naming is a universal act, but the naming practices are language-specific; every language has its own naming pattern worth investigating distinctively. Other scholars like Asheli (2017) conducted a comparative study on PNs in three languages: Kuria, Iraqw, and Maasai; Lusekelo and Manyasa (2022) analysed how gender is constructed in PNs in Nyamwezi and Sukuma. Generally, these studies confirm that PNs are attached with meanings and reflect various sociocultural realities in the studied languages.

Regarding the Sukuma language, a few studies on PNs and naming practices have been done (Manyasa, 2009; Athanas, 2019; Shigini, 2020) involving some dialects of Sukuma. For instance, the study by Manyasa (2009) focused on the Kemunang'weeli dialect, while Athanas (2019) and Shigini (2020) never specified which dialect(s) their studies focused on. The results of these studies generally allude to the meaningfulness of PNs. However, the results of these studies may not apply to other Sukuma dialects since there is a considerable dialectal variation in Sukuma (Muhdhar, 2006:12), which is a red flag against any ungrounded generalisation. On that note, Masele (2001:47) cautions that having accurate data on any language aspect (PNs included) is impossible unless each dialect of a particular language is analysed distinctively. Moreover, although some studies have alluded to the meaningfulness of Sukuma PNs, it is still unclear what kinds of meanings are embedded in Sukuma PNs. Therefore, unlike the previous studies on Sukuma PNs, the current paper examines the meaning of Sukuma PNs to make explicit the kinds of meanings embedded in them, focusing on the Kemunasukuma dialect.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study is based on Frame Semantics (FS) assumptions, which Fillmore developed in 1982. FS theory focuses on the meanings of words. According to Fillmore, meanings are relativised to scenes. This means that meanings have an inner structure that is determined in relation to a particular background frame or scene. FS emerged based on Fillmore's conviction that a semantic theory should be connected directly to how people understand real discourse in context (Goddard, 2011:78). The FS theory originates from cognitive linguistics (CL). CL concerns the connection between language, socio-physical experience, and the mind. CL's main idea is that words' meanings are connected to those who create and use them. This implies that meanings reside in people, the creators and users of words, not in the words themselves.

FS relates linguistic semantics to encyclopedic knowledge. The key idea of FS concerning word meanings is that “essentially all content words require for their understanding an appeal to the background frames within which the meaning they convey is motivated and interpreted” (Fillmore & Baker, 2010:318). This entails that we can only understand the meaning of words (PNs included) when we interpret them relative to their context of use or circumstances that motivated their choice. The meanings of PNs cannot be understood without knowing the circumstances behind their selection and use. This follows that the interpretation of PNs can only be made relative to the contexts or circumstances in which they are used or selected. In other words, people cannot comprehend the meaning of a word without access to all the essential knowledge (in mind) that relates to that word, which in most cases is culture-specific. Goddard (2011:78) says, “The meaning of a word can only be understood against a background of frame of experience, beliefs, or practices that motivate the concept that the word encodes.” Likewise, understanding the meanings of PNs requires one to know the circumstances behind their selection or usage. So, PNs can only be interpreted in relation to their contexts or circumstances of use or selection.

FS attempts to attain the meaning of words (PNs included) by linking them to a more extensive background frame. Frames refer to “organised packages of knowledge, beliefs, and practice patterns that shape and allow people to make sense of their experiences” (Fillmore & Baker, 2010:314). Through frames, people can perceive, remember, and make sense of their experiences. For example, comprehension of the meaning of a name requires one to know something about the situation or context, the culture, the language of origin, etc., in which that name is given or used. This is because PNs are embedded in a language that is a component of a particular culture. Thus, studying PNs means studying the language and culture from which PNs originate. On that note, words activate a semantic frame of encyclopedic meaning relating to the specific concepts they refer to or highlight. Therefore, the semantic analysis of Kemunasukuma PNs was conducted based on FS which relates to cultural knowledge and experiences.

### **Materials and Methods**

This paper adopted a qualitative case study research approach in collecting and analysing data. Qualitative research methods are very beneficial in gathering and analysing cultural-specific data concerning opinions, values, and social settings of a particular society (Mack et al., 2005:1). The data collected was inherently textual (i.e. PNs and their meanings) given the nature of the topic under investigation. The study was done in Shinyanga Region, mainly in Shinyanga Rural District,

specifically in the Imesela ward in Nyika, Imesela, and Maskati villages. The choice of the research site was based on the fact that it is one of the places where Kemunasukuma native speakers are found. The data was collected from a sample of twelve (12) elderly, competent, and reliable Kemunasukuma native speakers of either sex (aged 50 years and above) selected from the villages aforesaid. The sample was considered enough since the study of PNs and naming practices is not essentially about the vastness of the study area or the number of participants but about the participant's knowledge of PNs, competence in the language, experience, and memory of naming practices in the language under study. The sample involved was obtained through a purposive sampling strategy. In this type of sampling method, the researcher deliberately selects information-rich participants for in-depth interviews (Yin, 2016:93). Three focus group discussion sessions (one from each village) and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with four (4) elders from each named village were scheduled and conducted between October and November 2022. The choice of participants was based on the premise that they are native speakers of Kemunasukuma who were born and dwell in villages where the dialect is spoken. By age, these participants were considered to have knowledge about the typical Kemunasukuma PNs and Sukuma naming practices in general. The choice of older speakers over the younger ones was grounded on the assumption that the former is less influenced by other languages, such as Swahili, than the latter. Thus, older speakers have a better command of the language compared to younger speakers. The interview was the primary method used for data collection in this study. The method was used because it is useful in accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations, and constructions of reality (Punch, 2009:144). Also, focus group discussion was used to supplement and confirm the data collected through interviews. The PNs collected were grouped into categories that echoed the various factors that inspired their choice and bestowal, such as time of birth, place of birth, manner and order of birth, and birth circumstances, in the speech community under study.

## **Results and Discussion**

In line with the questions that the article set to answer, in this section, we present findings on the meanings implicit in Sukuma PNs. Thus, some of the categories of Kemunasukuma PNs and their meanings are presented and discussed hereunder.

### **Categorisation of Kemunasukuma PNs Names Associated with the Time of Birth**

Since names are regarded as being similar to "short stories" (Mandende, 2009:22) or "storerooms for keeping records" (Chipalo, 2019:75) in many traditional African communities, the Sukuma have names relating to

the time of birth as a way of keeping records that remind them of the time children are born. The Sukuma document five categories of time of the day: *dūyu* ‘early morning’, *kasana* ‘late morning’, *lūmi* ‘afternoon’, *mhindi* ‘evening’, and *bujiku* ‘night’. Doing so helps them to remember the time and everything that happened on the day a child was born. These times translate into different PNs denoting the children’s time of birth.

**Table 1: Names Associated with the Time of Birth**

Sukuma Name		Gloss	Associated Meaning
Female	Male		
<i>Dūyu</i>	<i>Dūyu</i>	early morning	Born very early in the morning
<i>Kasana</i>	<i>Misana</i>	late morning	Born late in the morning
<i>Lūmi</i>	<i>Malūmi</i>	Afternoon	Born in the afternoon
<i>Mhindi</i>	<i>Mhindi</i>	Evening	Born in the evening
<i>Njiku</i>	<i>Bujiku</i>	night	Born during the night
<i>Ng’weeji</i>	<i>Ng’weeji</i>	moon	Born at night with the moon shining
.....	<i>Likula</i>	lunchtime	Born during lunchtime
.....	<i>Masonda</i>	star/stars	Born at night with the stars shining

In relation to PNs in this category, one participant said, .....*idūyu ligabizaga likanza ilo abanhu batinamisha nulu gwibejabeja jisoga; ilikanza lya lūmi ilyene liliikanza isoga kunguno abanhu bubizaga bamishije nulu bibejabejaga. imhindi nulu ibujiku ilyene liliikanza ibii ilo abanhu bagabizaga bagokolo kulogunoga na mamilemo ga lūmi* ‘morning is the time people are not awake, prepared; afternoon is a good time because people are awake and prepared. Evening or night is a bad time when people are weak or tired’. This clearly points to the implicit philosophy of the Sukuma in relation to time. From the the quote given, it appears that the different times of the day are perceived differently by the Banasukuma: the morning time is equated to ‘early or unpreparedness’, afternoon is equated to ‘ideal or preparedness’, and evening or night equated to ‘late or old age’. This means that PNs given according to time of birth bear some connotations.

The PNs listed in Table 1 remind parents of the child’s birth time and everything that happened on that day. They carry denotative meaning (direct meaning that a name describes) and connotative meaning (meaning parents wish to express beyond denotative meaning). For instance, *Dūyu* ‘early morning’ or *Kasana* ‘late morning’ denotes the time the child was born, on the one hand, but connotes that s/he came early in their parent’s lives when they were still not well prepared, on



the other. Similarly, *Mhindi* ‘evening’ denotes when a child was born but connotes the child came late, at old age, in their parents’ lives. *Bujiku* ‘night’, *Masonda* ‘stars’, or *Ng’weeji* ‘moon’ connotes the child was born at the time the parents or the family was in serious problems and had lost hope completely.

### Names Associated with the Place of Birth

The places where children are born are echoed in the names bestowed on children. The names reflecting birthplaces are what Agyekum (2006:219) called *anthro-toponyms*. As Mandende (2009:22) argued that African PNs are analogous to short stories, Sukuma PNs also reflect the places their bearers were born, thus, telling exciting stories about their bearers. Before African societies came into contact with the western world, our forefathers had their traditional way of life with no modern hospitals, modern facilities, trained medical doctors, nurses, etc. Traditional healers (*ɓafumu* in Sukuma) were the only dependable people the sick could run to for medical help. This implies that pregnant women had no special places like hospitals or health centres where they could give birth; instead, they gave birth in any place where labour found them. Thus, the names given to children reflected the different places they were born. These include being on the road/path, at a water body like a lake, in foreign places, in a cowshed, granary when fetching cereals, inside a house, under a tree, and upon tree leaves. However, it was observed that, with modern health facilities available today, these PNs are mainly inherited from earlier generations as they have become family PNs. This is indicative of a change in naming practices among the Sukuma.

**Table 2: Names Associated with Places of Birth**

Sukuma Name		Gloss	Associated Meaning
Female	Male		
<i>Nyanzila</i>	<i>Mayila</i>	Roads	Born on the road or path
<i>Geeni</i>	<i>Mageni</i>	Foreign	Born away from home
.....	<i>Malale</i>	maize farm	Born on the maize farm
.....	<i>Ng’wandu</i>	baobab tree	Born under a baobab tree
.....	<i>Nshishi</i>	tamarind tree	Born under a tamarind tree
.....	<i>Kanyanza</i>	small lake	Born at a water body (lake)
.....	<i>Kanumba</i>	small house	Born inside a house
.....	<i>Lugendo</i>	journey	Born on a journey
.....	<i>Lugutu</i>	cowshed	Born in a cowshed
.....	<i>Kabelele</i>	granary	Born near the granary
.....	<i>Masaka</i>	bushes	Born in the bush

From the PNs presented in Table 2, one would observe that various birthplaces are noteworthy and reflected in the names given to children in Kemunasukuma. These include along the road/path, water bodies like lakes, foreign places, in a cowshed, near a granary when fetching cereals, on farms, in the bush, inside a house, on a journey, under a tree, and upon tree leaves. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the names reflecting the different birthplaces are predominantly male names; female names are very few. This observation suggests there is variability in the selection of PNs in Sukuma. While the names of males are freely selected, those of female children are selected with utmost care and consideration. The reasons for this variability were not made explicit by the participants during data collection. However, it could partly be due to a widespread folk theory among Africans that females should be exemplary and attractive in all senses, including their names.

### **Names Associated with the Manner and Order of Birth**

How children are born also determines name selections by name-givers, which is reflected in the PNs given to children. Manner of birth, according to Mutunda (2011:18), relates to the “sequence by which the mother has given birth; more specifically, the order in which children come”. In this paper, the manner of birth also encompasses how a child came to see the daylight. Name-givers consider how children came out of their mother’s womb and the sequence by which the mother has given birth. The Sukuma have fixed PNs for the first- and last-borns, but there are no fixed PNs between the first- and the last-borns. The firstborn is named *Tangi* ‘one who comes before others’ or *Ndugulile* ‘one who opens the doorway for others’. The firstborn is also referred to by a Sukuma phrase *jilugula bula*, which means ‘one who opens the womb’. The last-born is named *Kwangulija* (or *Kwangu*, for short) ‘one who closes the doorway’.

Similarly, the last-born is occasionally referred to by the phrase *jilaga bula*, which means ‘one who bids farewell to the womb’ in Sukuma. That is why the name *Walaga* ‘one who says goodbye to the womb’ exists. As pointed out earlier, the birth manner may also depict how children came to see the daylight. It needs no emphasis that, under normal circumstances, children are born head first. The child born legs first is named *Kashinje* ‘born legs first’. The child born normally (head facing down and head first) may be named *bundalaor Munde* (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Names Associated with Manner and Order of Birth**

Sukuma Name		Gloss	Associated Meaning
Female	Male		
<i>Tangi</i>	<i>Tangi</i>	come first/open	First born child
<i>Kwangulija</i>	<i>Kwangulija</i>	come last/close	Last born child
<i>Kulwa</i>	<i>Kulwa</i>	a twin	First born twin
<i>Dotto</i>	<i>Dotto</i>	a twin	Second born twin
<i>Shija</i>	<i>Shija</i>	Spare	First follower of twins
<i>Mhoja</i>	<i>Mhoja</i>	Comforter	Second follower of twins
<i>Kamuli</i>	<i>Kamuli</i>	light giver	Third follower of twins
<i>Kasanda</i>	<i>Kasanda</i>	Chaser	Fourth follower of twins
<i>Kashinje</i>	<i>Kashinje</i>	Abnormal	Born abnormally (legs first)
<i>Munde</i>	<i>Bundala</i>	face down	Born normally (head first)
<i>ɓɪsi</i>	<i>Kabɪsi</i>	unripe/incomplete	Born prematurely

Moreover, sometimes couples may experience multiple births or twins (*mabasa*, in Sukuma). The birth of twins is marked; they are regarded as a good omen. It is believed to be connected with some divine powers, and the twin children are treated with respect, fear, and care among the Sukuma. Therefore, twins are respected and regarded as special children. Due to the respect accorded to them, the whole system of naming other children within the family is affected by their birth. As such, the Sukuma have fixed special PNs for multiple births. Regardless of sex, the firstborn twin child is named *Kulwa*, and the second born twin child is named *Dotto* (or *Doi*, for short). The Sukuma also respect and regard as twin (*ɪbasain* Sukuma) the child born abnormally, that is, born legs first. In Sukuma, the birth of twins or a child born legs first acts like a ‘reset button’ for naming as it dictates what names should be given to other children that follow or even the one who preceded the twins irrespective of their sex. For example, the name for a child whose birth preceded the twins is renamed *Kabika* ‘twins’ elder’, irrespective of being initially named. The immediate follower of the twins is called *Shija*; the next is *Mhoja*, after that is *Kamuli*, and the next is named *Kasanda*. Also, there are instances where a mother gives birth prematurely; the child born prematurely may be named *ɓɪsi/Kabɪsi* ‘unripe’. The name *ɓɪsi* or *Kabɪsi* suggests that the name bearer is compared to a fruit; s/he can be ripe (if born after nine months) or unripe (if born before nine months). This is a typical metaphorical

instance whereby the meaning of one entity (the baby) is described in terms of another entity (the fruit) (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). This is the case given that naming is part of human cognition, and according to Evans and Green (2006:286), people's thoughts are primarily metaphorical. Although the literature shows variability in the presence of fixed names depicting manner and order of birth, the tendency of bestowing children with names associated with manner and order of birth is a common phenomenon that appears to matter and is among the factors that determine name choices in many African communities, including the Kamuə (Wappa & Wada, 2019), Akan, Ewe, and Ga (Adjah, 2011), and Luvalé (Mutunda, 2016). This suggests that some naming practices and beliefs are likely to be shared across many communities.

### **Names Associated with Circumstances at Birth**

The circumstances which surround or coincide with the child's birth determine the name-giver's name choices (cf. Mutunda, 2016:78). Sometimes the circumstances of birth depict the child's physical condition at birth, or its posture or position at birth (Ehineni, 2019:75). The Sukuma, like many people in Africa, bestow on children names that express the numerous circumstances surrounding their birth. The circumstances or conditions that prevail from conception to delivery are all profiled in the names bestowed on children. In this regard, birth circumstances include anything ongoing or occurring when a child is born or even during pregnancy. Thus, the circumstances may range from prenatal to postnatal and may include the family situation or condition, pleasant or unpleasant. In other words, the Sukuma tend to profile, in PNs, any event or condition they consider memorable and worth noting.

Thus, Kemunasukuma PNs reflect the diverse circumstances under which children are born. For instance, the child whose birth coincided with the falling of rain (*mbulain* Sukuma) or born during *shidiku/jidiku* 'rainy season' is named *Kabula/Mabula* (F/M) 'small/heavy rain'. The one whose birth occurred when a calamity has befallen the society like a locust infestation is named *Nyanjige/Mayige* (F/M) 'locusts'. The one born when hunger had affected the community is named *Nyanzala/Mayala* (F/M) 'hunger', and the one whose birth coincided with the lightning is named *Lukuba/Nkuba* 'thunder'. Similarly, PNs like *Makoye/Tabu* (M) 'problems' and *bulugu* 'conflict' also depict the circumstances during the child's birth.

Furthermore, death befalls the family or community; children born in such situations are bestowed with death-related names. For instance, if a baby is born soon after the demise or burial of a family member, it is named *Mjuka/Miki* (M) 'one who buries', derived from the verb

*jika/bika* 'bury' or *Shililo* (M) 'mourning' derived from the verb *lila* 'cry'. *Kalekwa/Mlekwa* (F/M) 'abandoned' is a name given to a surviving child whose mother died shortly after giving birth. Moreover, joyous circumstances may surround the birth of some children. The child whose birth coincided with a wedding event or any celebration in the family is named *Winga* (M) 'wedding', *Bukombe* (M) 'dowry-paying event', *Bucheyeki* (M) 'celebration', or *Buyegi* (F&M) 'joy'. The PNs bestowed on children in Sukuma profile diverse circumstances during pregnancy or birth. This trend of naming is also observable among the Akan (Agyekum, 2006), Yoruba (Olatunji et al., 2015), Vatsonga (Chauke, 2015), and Luvale (Mutunda, 2016). This indicates that birth circumstances are determinants of name choices among many African speech communities.

### **Names Associated with Death or Mourning**

It is widely known that death is natural and unavoidable in human existence; it affects the naming practices of the Sukuma. However, this situation is not unique to Sukuma only, as death occurs everywhere on Earth. Parents may experience several consecutive losses of their children, making them lose hope of having a child that would survive. Consequently, this situation tempts them to bestow death-related names on their children to express their grief and loss of hope. Sometimes conception or birth may happen when a family loses a relative or someone influential dies in the community. In such situations, name-givers may bestow on children names related to death or mourning.

Death-related feelings or experiences of parents are profiled in the names given to children. The names *Malongo* (M) 'soils', *Masalu* (F&M) 'sand', *Majahasi* (M) 'what goes to the ground or what is buried', and *Njile* 'goer/one who goes', connotes that their bearers' birth or conception happened after the parents have encountered a series of losses of other children. The name bearers, too, are hoped to die like their predecessors. Bestowing such names on children expresses the parents' loss of hope over having any surviving child. Also, *Ngeme* (M) 'let me try' or *Mgema* (M) 'one who tries' connotes that parents only try to have another child though they know it would not survive. *Kusolwa* (F) 'to be taken' or *Masolwa* (M) 'the taken ones' connotes that the name bearer will not be spared by death, and parents have no hope for its survival. *Maduhu* (M) 'empty' connotes that though the name bearer has come into its parents' life, it is as good as having no child as this will die soon.

As may be familiar to all human societies, the Sukuma have a tradition of mourning when their fellow family or community member dies. The mourning period may coincide with a woman's conception or birth in the

family or community. When a woman gives birth during the family's grief period, the newborn child is bestowed with a mourning-related name such as *Ng'hungwi* (M) 'lamentations' and *Miisoji* (F) 'tears'. Nevertheless, the bestowal of death-related names on children is done with varied beliefs or motives. While the Sukuma use death-related PNs to record death-related memories, the Yoruba (Ehineni, 2019), Iraqw (Asheli, 2017), Vatsonga (Chauke, 2015), Ibibio (Mensah & Offong, 2013), and Ewe, Ga, and Akan (Adjah, 2011) believe that death-related names prevent deaths.

### **Names Associated with the Seasons and Events in the Year**

The seasons and events in the year influence the naming practices of the Sukuma. Msuya (2021:84) argues that PNs "can reflect on the events and circumstances experienced in people's lives and tell stories of historic significance." Moreover, Chauke (2015:303) asserts that "names are not just mere tags but provide more insights into important social, cultural, and political events at the time of birth." Thus, parents are always keen to document and recall the different seasons, events, or everything that happened in the year the child was born. Parents recall their children's birthdays through names bestowed on them (cf. Chipalo, 2019:65). The PNs bestowed on children are regarded as archives through which parents keep their memorable records relating to a specific season or event in the year.

Thus, the different seasons or events (or activities) in the year children are born are enshrined in names. For instance, PNs *Shidiku/Jidiku* 'spring/fall', *Mafula/Kabula* (M/F) 'heavy/small rain', and *Malunde/Kalunde* (M/F) 'clouds/little cloud' are for children born during the rainy season. Moreover, during the spring or rainy season, the Sukuma engage in farming, *ilima* in Sukuma. Among the Sukuma, farming is done in stages such as *isenga* 'farm clearing', *ilima* 'ploughing', *ihamba* 'planting', *ngese* 'weeding', and *igesha* 'harvesting'. These stages are resonated in the PNs bestowed on children. The children born during *isenga* 'farm clearing' may be named *Kasenga* (M) 'minor clearing', *Masenga* (M) 'the clearing', or *Masengwa* (M) 'what is cleared'. The one born during the *ilima* period may be named *Malima* (M) 'cultivation'. The child born during the *ihamba* period is named *Kahamba* (M) 'planting'. The child born during the *ngese* period is named *Magese* 'weeding'; the child born during the *igesha* period may be named *Magesa/Mgesa* (M) 'harvesting/harvester'.

Furthermore, a child born during winter may be named *Lunyili/Kabehe* (M) 'cold' or *Manyilizu* (M) 'cold s/th'. Autumn is usually associated with the wind blowing, and sometimes the blowing wind may be destructive. Thus, the child born during the autumn with the blowing of strong wind may be named *Luyaga/Nyaga* (M) 'wind' or *Nshululu* (M) 'strong wind'.

The names given to children may also reflect the crops grown or harvested in a particular year or season. For instance, children born during the growing or harvesting or born in the season in which parents got massive yields of crops such as cotton, rice, tomatoes, and sweet potatoes are named *buluba*, *Mchele*, *Manyanya*, and *Manumbu*, respectively.

### **Names Associated with Parents' Behaviours**

PNs in this category relate to parents' bad or good manners. However, it is essential to note that parents are unlikely to bestow upon their children names that express their bad habits. Everyone in the community hates bad habits; not even those who exhibit them would wish to see such undesired habits in their children. No parents in their right senses would select and bestow on their children names that express bad behaviours. As Charwi (2019:95-96) argues, some PNs are given to children according to the habits of their parents. By observing the mother's behaviours during pregnancy or at birth, or the behaviours of both parents, grandparents, who are the respectable figures to whom the powers and mandate of conferring names on newborns are vested, bestow PNs on newborns that reflect their parents' manners. For example, the PNs *Milembe* (F) or *Maliganya* (M), which mean 'deceitful or misleading', are for children born to deceitful or misleading mothers or parents. Also, the PNs *Ibengwe* (M) 'disrespect', *bulemela*(M) 'disobedient', *Ntobi* (M) 'extravagant', and *Nsonganya* (M) 'instigator' are for children born to disrespectful, naughty, wasteful, and instigative mothers or parents. Contrarily, the PNs *Malonja* (M) 'caring' and *Kafula* (M) 'kind' are for children born to loving and kind-hearted mothers or parent(s). This is not unique to Kemunasukuma PNs; among the Vatsonga (Chauke, 2015:305) naming has "both positive and negative connotations depending on the mother's behaviour". Thus, parents may be caring, troublesome, deceitful, instigative, kind-hearted, ill-mannered, quarrelsome, extravagant, etc.

### **Names Associated with Artefacts or Tools**

This category of names is to do with items in the immediate environment, including artefacts and tools endemic to the surroundings where children are born. Through PNs, the Sukuma document essential items like production tools, weapons, and other prominent domestic tools. PNs in this category include cattle, crops, trees, and any surrounding geographical features (Chipalo, 2019:69). The purpose behind assigning children names relating to artefacts or tools is not well known. It is thought that these names were given with a purpose in the past, but over time, they have gained status as family names, not circumstantial names; they are therefore passed from generation to generation. These PNs are mostly given to male children; they include

*Machimu* ‘spears’, *Masonga* ‘arrows’, *Ipembe* ‘animal horn’, *Chenge* ‘wooden torch’, *Magembe/Igembe* ‘hoes/hoe’, *Kalang’ha* ‘small stick’, and *Kabelele* ‘granary’, a traditional store for storing crops (such as maize, rice, millet, etc.). For example, the name *Nonga*<sup>7</sup> ‘snail’s shell’ is used like a cup for taking herbs, while *Igembe* ‘hoe’ is useful in ploughing, planting, and weeding. This gives the reason these items deserved profiling in PNs bestowed on children and their significance in the life of the Sukuma. As Asheli (2017:68) argues, PNs of this category are used for record-keeping; they can indicate what happened when the child was born.

### **Categorisation of Meanings Entrenched in Kemunasukuma PNs**

The main idea of cognitive linguistics, in which FS theory is grounded, is that the meaning of words does not exist autonomously from the ones who create and use them. This suggests that meanings reside in people’s minds, the creators and users of words, not in the words themselves. Similarly, the meanings of PNs reside in the people who select and use them and in the culture from which they are drawn. The philosophy, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences of the people contribute enormously to the interpretation of meanings in PNs. This points to the reason why FS theory incorporates the concept of frames (cognitive structures). Frames shape people’s understanding of the meanings of words or linguistic expressions (Fillmore & Baker, 2010:317).

Moreover, the circumstances and contexts in which PNs are selected and bestowed are crucial for interpreting their meanings. So, how PNs are given and their meanings depend on the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences of the people who select and use them. This explains why the semantic analysis of Sukuma PNs was conducted along the lines of FS, which relates to cultural knowledge, beliefs, and experiences.

The analysis of the meaning of Kemunasukuma PNs in the present study generally indicates that names are meaningful, as they provide insights into numerous aspects of the life of the Sukuma. Based on the examples presented under each name category, it is clear that Kemunasukuma PNs have, on the one hand, denotative meaning by their status as words similar to other words in Sukuma, and connotative meaning that depends on the use or intent of the parents or name-givers, on the other. For example, the name *Duyu* ‘early morning’, *Kasana* ‘late morning’, *Lumi* ‘afternoon’, *Mhindi* ‘evening’, and *Bujiku* ‘night’ show different times of the day at which children are/were born.

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<sup>7</sup> Mostly used by *bafumu* ‘traditional healers’ as a tool for taking and administering herbs to patients.



Nevertheless, the PNs described above carry denotative and connotative meanings. For instance, *Duyu* denotes the time (morning) a child was born but connotes that s/he came very early in their parent's life when they were still unprepared to welcome and nurse the child. In other words, it indicates the parents got a child when they were teenagers. *Lumi* denotes the time (afternoon) a child was born but connotes that the child came when parents were ready to welcome the child. This means the child came at the right time when the parents were ready to nurse the child. In Sukuma, the afternoon, when people have lunch, is traditionally considered a good moment. Suppose someone visits a home and finds people having lunch. In that case, they usually welcome that person by saying, *makalibu, obyalilwahasoganoi* or *makalibu lulu, oshikilahahenegete* to mean 'you are welcome, you were born at the right/good time'. Here the literal meaning is that the visitor came at the right time when people were relaxed and enjoying their lunch or success. *Mhindi* denotes the time (evening) a child was born. It also connotes that the child came late, at old age, in the parents' life. The child came when its parents were old.

Concerning the meanings of Kemunasukuma PNs, although scholars (e.g. Muhdhar, 2006) argue that there is a considerable dialectal variation in Sukuma, the findings on the meaningfulness of PNs conform to those by Manyasa (2009) in Kimunang'weeli. However, the uniqueness of the current study in Kemunasukuma is in its attempt to make explicit the kinds of meanings embedded in PNs, unlike the previous studies by Manyasa (2009), Athanas (2019) and Shigini (2020), which focused on PNs' meanings in general. The exposition that Sukuma PNs have denotative or connotative meanings is what is new in the current study. This study argues that naming practices in all Sukuma dialects may be analogous, although minor variations exist. The dialectal variation reported in Sukuma could be in other language aspects like phonology and orthography.

## **Conclusion**

The primary aim of this paper has been to contribute to understanding the meaning of Sukuma PNs. The paper has attempted to provide a linguistic analysis of the meaning implicit in PNs in Kemunasukuma, one of the dialects of the Sukuma language. The study findings demonstrate that Kemunasukuma PNs fall into numerous categories based on the factors influencing their choice. The diverse categories of PNs generally point to the broad picture of the meaning implicit in them; they are vital pointers to the beliefs, experience, culture, aspirations, world view, language, etc., of the Kemunasukuma speech community. PNs in Kemunasukuma are ingrained with either denotative meaning or connotative meaning. This paper contributes to

the study of Sukuma anthroponomastics, particularly the kinds of meanings embedded in PNs. It answers one of the contentious issues in Onomastics, which concerns whether or not PNs are attached with meanings. Finally, we argue in this paper that behind every child's name in Kemunasukuma, there is always a meaning, whether explicit or implicit, that parents or name-givers would wish to share with family members or the entire community. Kemunasukuma PNs store information about people's values, experiences, aspirations, beliefs, expectations, worldviews, etc. Thus, PNs are similar to archives for keeping essential records related to the family or community.

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### **Author Biographies**

Peter Gongga Shigini is lecturer in Communication Skills in the Department of Human Capital Management and Administration, Moshi Co-operative University, Tanzania. His research interests are in the areas of morphology, sociolinguistics, and semantics. His recent publication is *An Analysis of Errors Made by Tanzanian Advanced Level Learners of English in their Academic Writing* (*East African Journal of Social and Applied Sciences*, 2020). He is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Dar es Salaam, focusing on the morphology and semantics of Sukuma personal names.

Gastor Mapunda is Associate Professor of English and Linguistics in the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. His research focuses on applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. His recent publications include *Imagined Futures and the New Technology: Youth's Language Attitudes in Songea, Tanzania* (*Language Matters*, 2021; with T. Rosendal), *On the Suitability of Swahili for Early Schooling in Remote Rural Tanzania: Do Policies and Practice Align?* (*Journal of the British Academy*, 2022; with H. Gibson), *Lexical Innovation through Swahilisation of English Lexicon in Online Advertisements* (UTAFITI, 2022; with E. Ilonga) and *An Appraisal of How Tanzanian Secondary School Teachers of English Use Oral Corrective Feedback Strategies in ELT* (*Journal of Linguistics and Language in Education*, 2022; with E. Kyara).