

# Of Barbers and Bottle Shops: Naming Businesses in South Africa

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It is well-known that African personal names are acts of linguistic creativity, in which almost any word, phrase or sentence may serve as an input base. Preliminary examination of a corpus of business names, collected during 1992-1996, suggests the same. Names are coined by both business owners and community members, and both types may become official registrations. Some name types are unsurprising, e.g. those in which businesses are named after their owners or the place in which they are located. However, with the exception of barber and beauty shops, these are relatively infrequent. Other types include: (a) general community-oriented positive messages, (b) advice/exhortation, (c) conflict/admonitory, (d) advertisement, (e) personal achievement, (f) thanking a relative or ancestor for success. Typological differences between African and Western naming of businesses are discussed.

The basic orientation in the paper is to view business and shop names as exemplars of visual communication. One cannot ignore the social basis of the reader-directed message here. As in recent research on African anthroponymy, the focus here is on the relationship between names and their donors, and on the ways in which the act of naming is an act of social communication, embedded within a cultural framework.

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The onomastic literature on Africa is rich in treatments of ethnonyms, toponyms, and anthroponyms. This literature is complex and multilayered, but there has been relatively little treatment of naming within the broader fabric of everyday life.<sup>1</sup> All of these name types reflect a sociocultural dynamism. In the case of ethnonyms, the label attached to one's own and others' ethnic group is obviously a political and cultural statement of identity, which is subject to both individual and bureaucratic manipulation (Herbert 1996). Similarly, the coexistence of competing toponyms, often drawn from different linguistic and cultural traditions in South Africa, has received significant attention in postapartheid South Africa (Jenkins, Raper and Möller 1996)). There are two major traditions of personal naming among the indigenous people of southern Africa, serving different social functions, but both of them reveal how infant naming is an act of personal creativity on the part of the namegiver and how name choice responds to changing sociocultural and political conditions (Herbert 1999). What is particularly striking about the dominant system of personal namegiving is the tremendous linguistic to say that any word, phrase or sentence may serve as the basis for a personal name, e.g. Zulu *Kuseni* 'in the morning', *Sipho* 'gift', *Ntombenkulu* 'big girl', *Mfanobomvu* 'reddish-colored boy,'

*Dumazile* creativity that is displayed by namegivers. It is only a small exaggeration 'caused disappointment,' *Funani* 'what do you want (from me)?,' *Ntombifikile* 'girl has arrived,' *Hambanenkosi* 'go with God,' *Mzikawupheli* 'the family does not end' as well as recent political names such as *Khululisizwe* 'release the nation,' *Nqobile* 'conquered,' *Lindokuhle* 'waiting for good things.' While these names are all semantically transparent, their significance can only be understood by reference to the context in which they were conceived and bestowed.

This paper considers the names of African-owned shops and small businesses in South Africa, with ultimate attention to a typological comparison of business names and personal names.<sup>2</sup> The latter focus is suggested by the fact that both onomastic types are acts of individual creation (unlike ethnonyms, for example). Within the African context, both types of names may "send messages" from the donor to other members of the community, and in this regard they are sociolinguistic facts. As Lévi-Strauss (1966) noted, this type of naming system, which he terms "immediate," concerns the name-giver more than its bearer. Donors, precisely because of their freedom to coin or select names, reveal their transitory and subjective states in the act of namegiving. In Lévi-Strauss' terms, these names *classify* donors. In a way that is quite distinct from Western practice, these informal shops are not necessarily named by their owners; it is fairly common that the shop's name (as indicated, for example, on the shop front and other signage) began as an informal name within the community. These names are often unflattering, but nevertheless accepted and endorsed by the owners. This acceptance of unflattering names is similar to the lack of negative attitudes toward negative personal names, e.g. Tsonga names such as *Nyelani* 'shit on me,' *Xifufununu* 'dung beetle,' *Tsameleni* 'why are you staying?.' Individuals who bear such names are most often puzzled when asked how they feel about these names. A model of namegiving in which names classify donors, rather than bearers, explains this reaction.

### Data

The data for the present analysis were collected in South Africa during the period 1992-1996. This period is an interesting one in South African history since it includes the period leading up to the transition to democracy, the first national election, and a period of flourishing social optimism thereafter. There are 350 names in the database, though this number includes some unrelated businesses with the same name, i.e. there is some duplication in the data.

Most of the names are drawn from shops and businesses within African communities around Johannesburg, although some of the names are taken from African-owned enterprises in KwaZulu-Natal and Phumalanga provinces. Any shop name is a potential candidate for inclusion in the data base except those whose names are wholly in either of the European

languages, Afrikaans or English.<sup>3</sup> The name of the business *type* (e.g. grocery, general dealer, barber, bottle shop) is often given in English or Afrikaans, as would be expected given that such commercial enterprises are not part of traditional indigenous culture: it is the name of the *individual* shop or business that must be encoded in one of the African languages in order to qualify for the present study. This linguistic restriction has the consequence of excluding larger, regional or national, African-owned businesses operating in the country.<sup>4</sup> All of the present data name small independent businesses, many of the "mom and pop" enterprises. The nature of the business is always immediately apparent. The meaning of the names is usually readily apparent, but the explanation for name choice was typically sought from the shop owner, e.g. Mokokotelo Fish & Chips 'something not real:' the owner explained that the name began as a complaint from the community that they could not find the products that they wanted in this shop. The name was a warning to the owner that he should do something different or close the shop. This datum is also an example of a name that began as an informal name within the community and became the official registered name of the business.

### Analysis

A preliminary inspection of the data reveals some name types that are unsurprising, e.g. small business named after their owners or the place in which they are located. Examples include *Sonto's Hair Salon*, *Jabu's Hair Salon*, *Tsakane (placename) Barber Shop*. Other than expressing the identity of shop's owner or its location, these names are not communicative. However, these names are relatively infrequent in the data. More commonly, shop names are intentionally communicative in the same way that personal names serve the dual function of identifying a particular individual and reflecting the subjective state (*classifying*, in Lévi-Strauss' term) of the namegiver.

Excluding the above from consideration, six other name types are identified in the data, all of which illustrate communicative intent. Broadly speaking, the namegiver "sends a message" to the community via the name displayed on the shop front. A general example is the type wherein the shop namer seeks to send a community-oriented positive message:

- Thandabantu General Dealer ('love the people')
- Masisizane Fish & Chips ('let's help each other')
- Thuthukani Shopping Centre ('progress')
- Masimbambane Supermarket ('let's hold each other's hands')
- Umphakathi Bottle Store ('community's')
- Eyethu Cinema ('it is ours')

There is some overlap between this category and a second one, in which the namer offers advice or exhortation to the community:

- Zithobeni Shopping Centre ('help yourself')

Ziphathe Kahle General Dealer ('behave well')  
Inafa Tinftwala Barber ('watch out for lice')  
Wafa Tinftwala Barber ('you are dying of lice')  
Vukuzake Trading Store ('wake up and build yourself')

A third type of shop name identifies conflict or admonishes members of the community:

Bangiswani Bottle Store ('why are you against me?')  
Qedumona Tea Room ('stop the jealousy')  
Thulani Bottle Store ('shut up')  
Tekatako Restaurant ('mind your own business')

All four of the above examples are responses from the shop owners to members of the community, who -- in the view of the owners -- resented the former's financial success and spread rumors about them. To an outsider, such names are curious choices since the success of any local business depends so directly on patronage from local residents. At the same time, we need to note that there are often no competitors for these shops, particularly in remote rural locations. Further, as noted above, the nature attitudes towards names within African communities is quite different from that found in Western societies.

More commonly, namers attempt to bring trade to their establishment by advertising the product or otherwise enticing customers:

Thengakhona Cafe ('buy here')  
Emakhaphetini Inn ('a place with carpets')  
Qedindlala Tea-Room ('stop hunger')  
Qedukoma Tavern ('quench thirst')  
Monate Cafe ('nice/delicious')  
Tekka Mahala Store ('take things free', i.e. buy on credit)

The fifth category of name celebrates the owner's achievement in having built the successful business:

Phenyl-e-Thata Bottle Store ('victory comes the hard way', i.e. it takes time to build a business)  
Zizenzele General Dealer ('we have made it for ourselves')  
Sizakancane General Dealer ('we are coming slowly')  
Kedirile Inn ('I worked hard')

Finally, a sixth category gives thanks to a family member or an ancestor for success in business:

Mandlakababa Cafe ('power of my fathers')  
Sifiso sagogo laMalaza Bottle Store ('Grandmother Malaza's wish')  
Rakgadi Restaurant ('aunt's'; deceased aunt's estate paid for the business)

## Discussion

Imposed classifications such as the above are satisfying in some respects, but they need to be viewed with caution. On the one hand, the categories are imposed by the act of classification and do not flow naturally from the data themselves. This helps to explain the rather significant overlap in categories and the difficulty in classifying some individual tokens. In addition, attention only to surface forms and meaning may obscure a deeper message within the name. The deeper meaning, occasionally termed name *significance*, is embedded within the sociocultural context; further, shop names often play on multiple meanings. For example, *Majuba Store* 'cutter' (= killer) reveals multiple layers of meaning. The owner was sending a message to the community with this name. He is a member of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), a church that has been popularly associated with "medicine killings," i.e. killing people in order to obtain particular body parts for medicinal purposes. The community widely believes that the shop owner is implicated in these killings and they point to his outward pride and bravery as evidence that he has consumed human liver. By the name of his shop, the owner wishes to confront his accusers and deny the claim. A second meaning of *majuba* is 'doves.' (The noun *ijuba* (plural *majuba*) means 'dove' while the verb *-juba* means 'cut.')

One of the ZCC emblems is a dove, and the owner plays with this double meaning in his shop name, somewhat taunting the community. Another example comes from *Lipiki Liyeta Dzadze Restaurant* ('the pick is coming, sister'). *Lipiki* 'the pick' is a name for illegal home-brewed alcohol that has poisoned some local residents. The warning from the community is that *dzadze* 'sister,' the restaurant owner, is killing her customers. *Lipiki* is also used to dig graves. In this case, the community warns people that they are digging their own graves with the illegal alcohol. There is also a warning to the owner that she needs to be more careful of the quality of her home brew. A final example is which the intent of the name is not directly obvious comes from *Hahlulani General Dealer* 'destroy.' This shop is near a high school and the owner used to shout at students during the lunch hour *Hahlulani, i-xitolo xa nwina kutahlu pheka nwina* 'Destroy, it is your own shop and you will suffer in the end.' Whenever the students saw the owner or passed the shop, they would shout *Hahlulani*, and this eventually became the shop's officially registered name.

Mancuso (1978) offers practical advice, within an American context, on how to name a business. In addition to recommending the avoidance of one's own name and nonsense words, he recommends that the business name (a) describe the product or service, (b) distinguish the product with an easily-recognized and recallable name, (c) be pleasant-sounding and graphically appealing, (d) does not limit future expansion (1978: 22-26). Only the first of these applies within the context described in this paper.

In this brief paper, it is not possible to investigate further the ways in

which shop and business names reflect individual and cultural dynamics. However, it is useful to consider similarities between the functions served by these name types and the functions of oral literature more generally. For example, Bascom (1965: 279-298) noted four major functions: psychological release, validation of culture, education, and social control. On another level, one can identify the multiple functions served by business names in the data base:

- (a) business identity
- (b) marketing strategy, advertisement
- (c) deflecting social tension
- (d) transmitting cultural values
- (e) psychological release

### Conclusion

In a very broad sense, the shop and business names considered in this paper mirror personal names within the same African communities. Both systems of naming depend critically on sociocultural fabric to create contexts and meaning for individual namegivers in which they exercise social communication through the act of naming. The same categories of names are found in both shop and personal names. All of these names send messages and they are thus sociolinguistic facts. Names are strategies, exploited by donors, to comment indirectly on everyday life. Many of the same messages expressed in names would cause disharmony if they were uttered in face-to-face interaction. Clearly, different pragmatic rules operate in naming than in conversation. What is worthy of study is the ways in which shop and business names, both those coined by owners and those coined by community members, are transmitted from oral to graphic form and eventually become official names for government registration. In the meanwhile, this paper has demonstrated once again, however, the dynamic nature of naming as a linguistic act and the need for cross-cultural studies of naming within particular domains.

### Notes

1. There are some important exceptions to this generalization, most notable the naming of ritual objects, domestic animals, and spirits.
2. I am grateful to my former students, Godfrey and Evelyn Mothibe, Zodwa Vilakazi, and Pumla Mdonstwa for their discussion of these and other African language data.
3. There are nine officially-recognized African languages in South Africa. The database includes items from each of these nine, though there is a preponderance of Zulu, Swati, Tsonga, Pedi, and Sotho on account of the geographic distribution of the study.
4. Different onomastic rules apply in the naming of these enterprises

since they often seek to serve a more literate, wealthier segment of the multiracial population. Indeed, the fact of the business being named in a non-African language identifies the enterprise as belonging outside of the immediate community. Further, because they do not draw on indigenous linguistic repertoires, these names do not operate within the onomastic traditions of African cultures.

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