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You are what you Look: A Socio (Linguistic) Analysis of Some Kaonde Nicknames Associated with Physical Appearance

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Abstract: ***The Kaonde language is part of the Bantu language family found in South Central Africa. It is spoken by the baKaonde ethnic group in Zambia's North Western and Central provinces. Nicknames are an essential part of the baKaonde naming system and hold significant importance in their culture. These nicknames are given to describe people based on their physical characteristics, animal-like features or things, social habits, and so on. Among the Kaonde people, nicknames serve different social functions such as endearment, humor, mockery, social counsel, expression of bravery, and lifestyle. This study aims to investigate Kaonde nicknames associated with physical appearances and features of people. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how Kaonde speakers play with language in their naming systems and how they use 'frames' of meaning to coin new words (nicknames) from existing linguistic resources. The data for this study was collected through qualitative ethnographic methods, including participant observations and personal interviews with ten purposively selected respondents, as part of a larger study on Kaonde nicknames. The study findings reveal that Kaonde nicknames describe an individual's physical appearance and features, either positively or negatively. These nicknames may arise from other people's physical features and animal characteristics which are likened to individuals being nicknamed. Some nicknames may be known or unknown to the nicknamee, depending on their connotations, context of use and existing personal relationship between the namer, and the named. These findings reflect human interactions among themselves and with other living beings and the extended naming system of the Kaonde speakers to include nicknames.***

Keywords: Kaonde, Nicknames, Nicknaming, Physical Feature, Zambia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kaonde (L41), also known as kiKaonde, is a Bantu language spoken in certain districts of North-Western and Central provinces of Zambia by a group of people called baKaonde [1]. The language has a 'mixed' naming system with influences from both colonial impositions through Christianity and African cultural ways of life. It is therefore commonplace to find a person with a first name that has a Western origin and a second or family name with an African origin. In addition, it is also common to find names of places (toponyms) such as towns and districts bearing colonial vestiges and others, particularly rural ones, bearing African names.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in the way that many Kaonde speakers choose to name their children. They are now partially decolonizing names that have colonial origins and replacing them with African names that have Christian connotations. For example, children are now being given names such as Mapesho (meaning "Blessings"), Lukumo (meaning "Glory"), Bibusa (meaning "Grace"), Lutekenesho (meaning "Comfort"), Kyeya (meaning "Light"), Lumwekesho (meaning "Revelation"), and so on. While the intention behind these new names is to decolonize, they still show traces of Western religious influences in their Christian undertones. As a result, the Kaonde naming practices continue to reflect the impact of Christianization and other Western influences.

While bestowing a proper name to a person and other important things around them may have a defined way, nicknames do not in Kaonde. Instead, these are often given casually and haphazardly and can hardly be traced to the name or name-giver [2]. Members of society simply carry out the naming as part of their linguistic and cultural practices and for performing specific social functions. However, this does not mean the nicknames bestowed in this manner are meaningless and worthless to interrogate. On the contrary, nicknames among the Kaondes are symbolic linguistic elements laden with meaning worth investigating [3].

This study aims to investigate Kaonde nicknames associated with physical appearances and features of people. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how Kaonde speakers play with language as social practice in their naming systems [4] and how they use ‘frames’ of meaning to coin new words.

2. RELATED WORKS

Names are reflective of human social practices and experiences. They are therefore significant parts of language because they are not arbitrary symbols. Instead, they are meaningful linguistic and cultural elements that signify status, achievements, and privilege. They also provide meaningful socio-organization of society [5]. The practice of naming is as old as humanity and is a commonplace practice that distinguishes humans from all other living creatures [3].

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Wakumelos' study [6] provides insights into how human beings extend their agency of naming to other animate beings and by the same principle to peculiar aspects of social life such as nicknames. Thus, her study demonstrates human creativity in manipulating language as a resource in forming meaningful linguistic tokens such as nicknames, see [7]; [8]; [9]. This act of giving names is essentially demonstrable in nicknaming. Therefore, the human creativity of language use will further be evident in Kaonde nicknames associated with physical appearances and features.

Although proper names seem to carry more meaning than nicknames, nicknames are equally significant and semantically loaded linguistic tokens. Sometimes, nicknames are derived from first names as clips or short versions of the original and are often given by family or friends. In such cases, nicknames express endearment [10]. While in other cases, nicknames can be seen as derogatory and offensive [11].

De Klerk [12] views nicknames as symbols of disapproval or criticism of the bearer. She divides the nicknames into two categories, that is, those that are unambiguous, positive, and neutral, and those that are ambiguous and can be interpreted as negative and used with critical intent. The study also identifies a category of nicknames with a positive or neutral message. Nicknames could be regarded as indicators of the social importance of a bearer [12].

Some studies show that people are noticed and named after any physical features they have. These could be positive or negative. Related to De Klerk's study, for example, is a study on offensive nicknames derived from a person's abnormalities [10]. The study argues that such nicknames often hurt the feelings of the bearer and are often regarded as derogatory and unacceptable societal practices. Besides, nicknames that take after one's abnormalities are termed name calling, unkindness, and verbal harassment [11]. They are also seen as hurtful, derogatory, and a bad social habit.

Another study focused on nicknames with varied sources among which included nicknames derived from one's physical features and appearances [13]. However, unlike scholars who saw nicknames as derogatory and hurtful pieces of language, this study argues that such nicknames played a social function of endearment. While nicknames of endearment are known and enjoyed by the nicknamed, most nicknames, particularly, offensive ones, may not typically be known to the bearer and if known, they may have different emotional effects. To this end, [14] states that the person nicknamed does not often know his or her nickname. The nickname may be used privately by the creator among group members but once it is known it may be used publicly to lampoon the nicknamed.

In agreement with other scholars, [14] reveals that nicknames can be derived from a human body. These would often relate to body size, structure, or abnormalities observed in a person. He points out that the body of a person is regarded as an easy target in the coining of nicknames. According to [14, p. 73] "Physical features of human beings can be instrumental

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in offering items to make nicknames". This means that certain body parts are useful (re)sources and symbols for nicknames.

In his analysis, [14] investigates the social role played by a nickname in the life of a person and how the bearers respond when they learn of their nicknames. He maintains that the primary function of nicknames is to identify and label an individual as a member of a group with shared socio-cultural experiences although, as it will be argued in this study, sometimes, certain nicknames can be used to exclude a member from a group. He claims that nicknames are rich in poetic allusions and may have a hidden meaning too.

An analysis of Xhosa, a language spoken in South Africa, nicknames and their different categories was carried out by Neethling [15]. He defines a nickname as a form of address that eliminates the personal name. He points out that among the Zulus, a nickname is so important that the name sometimes may assume a secondary position. His interpretation of nicknames showed that they can be widely interpreted to accommodate various kinds of nicknames.

From the literature reviewed, there are no known studies that focus on nicknames derived from one's physical appearance or features in Zambia. In Zambia, a few studies on nicknames have covered different topics. For example, nicknames of national football teams in Southern Africa [2], and the morphology and semantics of nicknames among the Ng'umbo people of Zambia [16].

A study of nicknames given to selected national football teams in the Southern African region examined the nicknames of national football teams to show how these names reflect a relationship between society and the world in which they are found [2]. The study specifically dealt with the etymology of the nicknames, and their features that motivate the adaptation of the nicknames given to the teams. The study revealed that although nicknames in football may be used for humor, they could be used as symbols for national unity and pride [3].

Kabaso looked at Ngúmbo nicknames in Zambia, a Bemba dialect spoken in the Luapula province of Zambia, by an ethnic group of people called Abena Ng'umbo 'the Ng'umbo people'. His findings show that nicknames have morphological structures whose parts can be decomposed to understand how they are constituted. Kabaso also showed that nicknames have themes contained in them which give semantic values, combined with the cultural and social experiences of the Ngumbo dialect speakers [16].

The related works show that nicknames as meaningful entities of language play different social functions that often are reflective of people's social and cultural experiences. These studies provided essential insights for the current paper.

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Theoretical Framework

The study is rooted in the frame semantics theory, a theory proposed by Fillmore [17]. This theory accords the researcher a kit with which to examine and analyze the nicknames of Kaonde to understand their meanings, and motivations behind the nicknaming practices of the people. The theory is largely influenced by semantics, a meaning-based level of linguistic analysis.

Semantics is generally the study of the meanings of words and phrases. Meaning is about what a word refers to, signifies, expresses, and its associated internal and psychological importance [18]. Over the years and owing to its applicability in the area of meaning, Frame semantics has been applied in the area of syntax and semantics itself, more generally.

As a theory of language and meaning, frame semantics assumes that meanings embedded in words used by speakers, especially nouns such as nicknames, and verbs, represent a specific meaning or function. The meaning or reference expressed by these words assumes that the user or speaker has sufficient background knowledge or shared experiences which provide a 'frame' enabling him or her to use the words appropriately and effectively in the process of communication. Names are words and thus, about word meanings. Studies in frame semantics have focused on understanding the motivation that a speech community may have for forming the class represented by the word and offering an explanation of the meaning conveyed in that word [18].

Frame Semantics theory is relevant to this study because it facilitates the decomposition of the selected nicknames into analyzable units. This conceptual structure plays a major role in one's attempt to get to the core meaning of a word. It therefore means that the background or experiences that one has would determine the kind of interpretation one would give to a word or a phenomenon. For instance, a nickname given to a teacher can only be best understood by students who had an experience with the teacher bearing the nickname, and each time that nickname is mentioned, the background knowledge that a learner has could help him or her to interpret the meaning. This is made possible because of the earlier experience that learners might have shared. The same nickname might conjure a different interpretation by another due to different experiences [18]. It is from this point of view that this theory is found relevant to analyzing the meanings of nicknames in Kaonde.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Solwezi, an emerging mining town of Zambia located in the North-Western province of Zambia. The choice of the site was motivated by the fact that the district is known to have a majority of native speakers of Kaonde. Using ethnographic methods of data collection, ten native speakers of the language were purposively selected for oral interviews.

During the interviews, the speakers were asked to provide nicknames they knew of which described someone's physical appearance or features. In addition, participant observations

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were used to collect data associated with nicknames. The focus of this method was on nicknames that related to the physical appearance and features of an individual. Both exercises yielded a total of forty-five nickname tokens which were then segregated according to types or thematic categories before subjecting them to a full linguistic analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study findings indicate that Kaonde speakers use physical characteristics or features of human beings and animals to create nicknames. The research identified four categories of physical appearance-based nicknames, which are based on an individual's height, body imperfections and abnormalities, skin tone, and animal-based features.

4.1. Height Based Nicknames

These are nicknames that describe someone's height, whether short or tall. The nicknames may be derived from people, things, or animals which may share features used to nickname others. In the Kaonde speech community, nicknames that originate from one's height include the following:

4.1.1. Some English Loanwords as Nicknames

Longwanyi 'the tall one', is a nickname, which originates from the English phrase long one. Although the word as used in English cannot be used to describe a person, the word, which is an adjective, has been borrowed into Kaonde, adapted or localized in both form and meaning. We note that this word when borrowed into Kaonde, does not retain its original meaning except in sense or logic. Therefore, what has been borrowed is the 'sense' implied in the meaning of the word rather than its original meaning derived from the form of the word. This is because in Kaonde there is no distinction between length and height. Instead, context and the accompanying class nominal prefix (associated with Bantu languages of Africa) determine the distinction and associated meaning. Thus, the root, -lepa, can mean either something long or tall. In this regard, this root, lepa, is used to refer to both distance and height and what would distinguish the referent is the context of use and the prefix attached to it.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Longwanyi 'long one' can be used to refer to someone's gigantic height above what could be considered average by society (the standard is set by members of the Kaonde community). Thus, this nickname is given to someone whose height is considered to be above the normal height (expected average height of the population), and depending, on the nature of the height, the nickname may be known or unknown to the bearer. This is to say, in some cases, the nickname may be used for endearment while in other contexts it may be used derogatively. However, it must be noted that this nickname has since been ameliorated and as such may sometimes be found used as a personal name or toponym (name) of a village. In such cases, the nickname sheds off its derogative meaning which it may have once carried.

Tolofwelo or simply Tolo 'tall one' - this nickname also originates from English as a loan. In English, the word means 'tall fellow' [tɔ:l fɛlɜʊ] and is equally given to a very tall person. In

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most cases, the nickname may be offensive and thus may be unknown to the bearer because of its intended negative connotation. However, it can be used humorously or for endearment among people who enjoy close relations.

Unlike in Longwani, the nickname Tolofwelo which is a corrupted form of the English adjective ‘tall fellow’, appears to retain both the original meaning and sense of the word except, in this instance, the word class changes from an adjective to a noun (nickname). Furthermore, we also note that, unlike Longwanyi, Tolofwelo is not used as a family name. This could point to the fact that the nickname seems to have stronger association with derogation than the earlier one. Thus, it can be argued that nicknames that seem to have a low association with derogation but with a higher affinity to humor and endearment eventually end up as family names while those with a stronger association with derogation and a lower affinity to humor and endearment do not and are often used without the nicknamee’s knowledge.

4.1.2. Kaonde Height-Based Nicknames

The research found that some nicknames are based on the physical characteristics of things, animals, or people that are shared with those being nicknamed. For instance, Kafupi is a nickname commonly given to someone very short. Unfortunately, this nickname is often used to mock and offend anyone with a short stature similar to a dwarf. The word kafupi originated from the Nyanja phrase kufupika, which means "to be short." The prefix ka- attached to the root –fupika indicates smallness or diminutiveness. Nyanja is another Bantu language spoken in Zambia and Malawi. Therefore, when attached to the adjectival root -fupika, which means "short," it emphasizes the size and height of the person being nicknamed.

The nickname ‘Njabuluba’ meaning ‘giraffe’ is often given to exceptionally tall individuals. It is derived from the height of a giraffe, which is a wild animal renowned for its towering height. When used in reference to a person, the nickname ‘giraffe’ evokes the idea of height, while in a zoo or park, it refers to the animal known for its outstanding height. However, this nickname can be offensive and unknown to the person it is given to.

4.2. Bodily Imperfections

The study established nicknames whose origin is associated with physical imperfections like that of dwarfism seen above. Such imperfections could be in terms of people's physical appearance or actual defects in body structure. These are then used as sources of nicknames. The name givers often disregard people's emotional well-being and mock the imperfections through the creation of nicknames out of them. Some Kaonde nicknames have been formed from people who have bodily abnormalities such as having one part of the body missing or disproportionate to the other parts of the body, see [11], [14].

The specific abnormality would be used to derive the nickname. For example, a human being with an abnormal facial appearance is nicknamed Kimpashanya which is derived from the verb -pasha ‘look like’. This nickname means an image-like-figure whose actual identity

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is unknown. The fact that one's identity is 'unknown' speaks to the insignificance attached to the nicknamed owing to their perceived imperfections in facial appearance. This nickname could also be given to a person considered ugly. The nickname is offensive as it does not only injure someone's emotional feelings but also tends to exclude the individual from a group or society, see [10]. In some cases, the nicknamees end up withdrawing from society or committing suicide as they often feel rejected.

Being tiny in body stature, often with tiny arms and legs, also attracts nicknames such as Katyetye 'a smallest bird,' or Kapyopyo a small chicken'. The nicknames are derived from the names of the smallest bird species and a small chicken, respectively. These nicknames are often used derogatorily.

A person who stutters in speech is nicknamed Kalukufya 'one who speaks with difficulty'. This nickname is also used to mock a person with such an abnormality.

4.3. Skin Tone Related Nicknames

The study found that people often use skin tone to give someone a nickname, to differentiate them from others. The nicknames are based on a "skin tone continuum" which has two extremes, too light or too dark, and is used to describe a person's complexion. These nicknames can both be used for endearment or derogatory.

For instance, a light-skinned person with curly hair is nicknamed Kazungu muzhi, which translates to a small village White person. The word 'zungu' means white person, while 'ka-' in kazungu is a class 12 nominal prefix for diminutives in Bantu languages, and 'muzhi' means village. When these two elements combine, they would usually mean a small white person. However, in this context, the class prefix 'ka-' does not refer to a diminutive. It appears that this prefix is 'empty' and used only for structural purposes. Since this nickname is associated with 'whiteness', it is sometimes used to show endearment.

Therefore, the nickname Kazungu muzhi connotes a Black person who behaves or acts like a 'White person' but lives in a village under the same conditions as other ordinary Black people. During the colonial era, being 'White' meant a better life than that of a Black African. This perception persists in most African societies even today. Under colonialism, a White person was considered a first-class citizen who had access to all the luxuries of life and the ability to employ and provide Africans with a better life. The White man lived in affluence and was separated from the ordinary dwellings of an African. It is still common to find someone calling a fellow 'privileged' African a Muzungu, meaning a White person, on account of that person's better living conditions, affluence, or higher level of education, which are still associated with 'whiteness'.

If a person is on the other side of the 'skin tone continuum' mentioned above, that is being too dark, he/she would be nicknamed Kifita. Kifita originates from the color black and refers to anything black or dark. Thus, Kifita is given to a person who is considered to be extremely dark in complexion. The nickname bearer is derogatively nicknamed by acquaintances. Such

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a nickname may be used in secrecy when talking about the named individual and thus may be unknown to the bearer. When known, the nickname may cause emotional hurt to the nicknamed person. However, there are times when the nickname may be used for humor especially when used by very close friends and family members. It is the humor side of the nickname that has caused the amelioration of the nickname into a family name. In this regard, it may not express the original intention of mockery but the appropriated humorous aspect of it.

4.4. Nicknames Relating to Abnormal Body Parts

Abnormality in body parts is another source of nicknames. These nicknames have to do with body parts such as ears, feet, lips, teeth, and so on which might have abnormalities or near abnormalities. Some of these abnormalities could be caused by disease, accidents, or simply inborn. Some of the nicknames arising from such features include the following:

The nickname Kitengwe originates from a particular species of bird with red eyes and black feathers. These birds are often seen hovering over burning bushes, searching for insects or grasshoppers that are trying to escape the fire. If someone has red eyes that are more prominent than usual, they may be given the nickname ‘Kitengwe,’ which can be used in a derogatory manner. It is often used to mock someone and may not be said directly to their face.

Kituta is a type of mouse that has a round appearance. This particular mouse usually stays inside its dwelling and has two sharp, front teeth that stick out, similar to congenital teeth defects in humans. When roasted, Kituta is known to be fatty and is considered a delicacy. Due to its distinctive features, the nickname is given to people who have congenital teeth defects, such as having two front teeth that abnormally protrude from the gums or having large gaps between them. It can also be used to refer to someone who is obese, based on the shape of the mouse.

Kalulu, which is a local word for hare or rabbit, is a term that can be used to describe an individual with dental defects that are similar to those found in mice, particularly Kituta. The similarity in the dental features shared between the two makes Kalulu a suitable nickname for someone with congenital teeth defects that resemble those of a mouse. However, Kalulu can also be used as a nickname for someone brave, as this name is associated with bravery in traditional fairy tales.

Menomeno is a nickname formed by repeating the word ‘meeno’, which means ‘teeth’. This nickname can be used to refer to someone with congenital teeth defects and used in a derogatory manner.

The Kingalika, also known as the zebra, is a type of wild horse that is native to Africa. This animal is well-known for its natural beauty, which is characterized by its gentle nature, unique striped coloring, and well-proportioned body shape. The Kaonde community holds this animal in high esteem, and it is never hunted for meat. As a result, among the Kaonde

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people, a woman who is considered beautiful may be nicknamed Kingalika because of her distinctive physical features, such as a medium-sized body, big buttocks, slender waist, straight legs, and wider hips. This nickname is seen as a term of endearment, and it is often welcomed by the recipient due to its positive connotation of beauty.

On the other hand, a woman with oversized breasts may be given the nickname Bonita. This name is derived from a brand of dairy product also called Bonita. Since dairy products come from the udders or 'breasts' of cows, the nickname likens a woman with larger breasts to a cow's udders. This nickname is considered derogatory.

A man with a perceived large penis is sometimes nicknamed 'mwachusa' after foreign men believed to have larger penises. This nickname is used to mock men with larger penises.

6. CONCLUSION

This study reveals how the Kaonde-speaking community expands their naming practices to include the use of nicknames. These nicknames are derived from the physical characteristics and appearances of members within the community. Interestingly, the Kaonde speakers not only utilize human physical features to create nicknames but also draw comparisons to other resources with similar features. As a result, we have broadly identified two distinct categories of physical feature/appearance-based names. The first category is based solely on an individual's body features or appearance, while the second category includes the use of animal features that are exaggeratedly similar to humans in order to create unique nicknames through comparison.

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