

# ***Sociolinguistic meaning of Bantu place names: The case of Ruhaya in north-western Tanzania***

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the sociolinguistic meaning behind the adoption of place names in Ruhaya, the language spoken in north-western Tanzania. The paper based on the assumption that place names are not arbitrary labels but are connected with particular social-cultural phenomena such as community heroes or persons who made notable contributions to the society or people who had achieved particular notoriety or events that had come to be considered unique. These would be reflected in what the name was derived from in the appropriate time and place (appropriate context). The paper reveals that Ruhaya place names have meanings which tend to be derived from phenomena such as names of unique people, events, fauna, flora, crops raised, habitation information, natural terrain and activities carried out in the area to which the name is given. Also, place names in Ruhaya have meanings relating to parts of the human body such as hip, nape, tongue, breast and heart. As language advance, it was necessary to explore such sociolinguistic elements as an important contribution to the growing body of sociolinguistics and linguistics knowledge relating to languages spoken in Tanzania and Africa in general.*

## **Introduction**

Ruhaya is a Bantu language spoken in one of the Tanzania mainland regions namely Kagera. The region is situated in north-western Tanzania to the west of Lake Victoria, bordering Uganda to the North and Rwanda and Burundi to the West. It covers a total area of almost 40,838sqkm with 28,953sqkm being land masses and 11,885sqkm being water bodies like lakes and rivers (Mutembei, 2001). In pre-colonial times the region was politically divided into eight chiefdoms which were Karagwe, Bugufi, Bushubi, Bugabo, Ihangiro, Kiziba, Kihanja and Kyamutwala. This was before the coming of the agents of colonialism (Mutembei, ibid). The coming of colonial agents, especially missionaries and traders, affected the medium of interaction among the Bahaya as before their arrival, Ruhaya was the only language used by Bahaya in all aspects of life. The term Ruhaya originated from the term Buhaya, the name of the area that previously belonged to the group of fisherman who lived along the north-western shore of the Lake Victoria. These people were called Abahaya. According to Mulokozi (1986) and Kilaini (1990), the term Abahaya was used interchangeably with the names of the eight northern chiefdoms referred to earlier. The language varieties spoken by the people belonging to those chiefdoms tended to be viewed as dialects of a single language family called *Ruhaya*.

Kagera region is divided into eight districts which are Bukoba-Urban, Bukoba-Rural, Karagwe, Muleba, Misenyi, Chato, Biharamulo, and Ngara - see the map below (Language of Tanzania Project, 2009, p. 25). The geographical areas covered by these eight administrative districts in some respects coincide with the pre-colonial chiefdoms

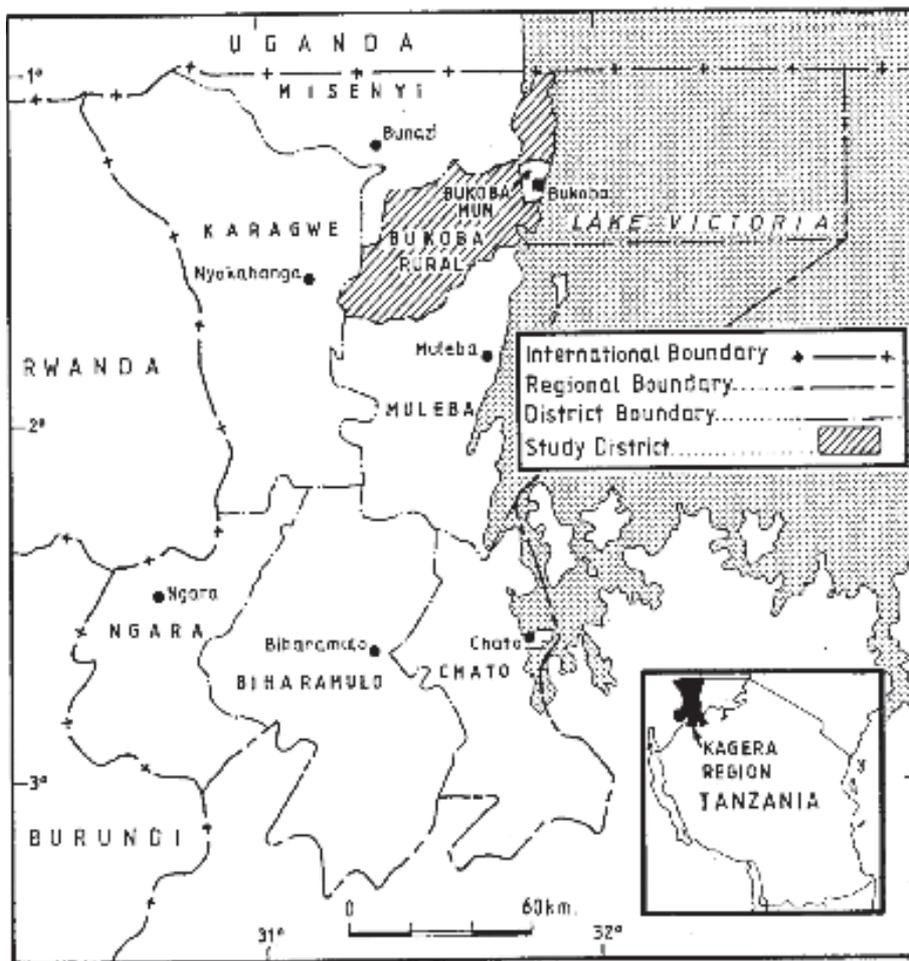
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mentioned earlier: Bukoba (Urban and Rural) coinciding with the pre-colonial chiefdoms of *Bugabo* and *Kihanja*); Karagwe coinciding with the pre-colonial chiefdom known by the same name Karagwe; Muleba coinciding with the pre-colonial chiefdom of *Ihangiro*; Misenyi coinciding with the pre-colonial chiefdom of *Kiziba*; Chato and Biharamulo coinciding with the pre-colonial chiefdom of *Bushubi* and Ngara coinciding with the pre-colonial chiefdom of *Bugufi* (Lwamgira, 1949; Katoke, 1975; Cahoon, 2000). This paper limits itself to the administrative and geographical area of Bukoba-Rural District, specifically investigating the meanings of village names found in the area known by its pre-colonial chiefdom name of *Kihanja*, where the Ruhamba dialect of Ruhaya is spoken.

**Map: Kagera Region Showing its Current Districts**



### **The concept of Sociolinguistics**

Sociolinguistics is defined as the study of the effect of all aspects of society including cultural norms, expectations and context on the way language is used (Romaine, 2000). It focuses on the effect of the society on language. It also studies individual and social variation of language. According to Trudgill (1983), sociolinguistics is a study that investigates the relationship between language and society. Thus, it deals with language in relation to its socio-cultural context. Msanjila et al (2009, p. 2) adds that, the relationship between language and society is like two sides of the same coin. This means that without society there is no language and without language there is no society. Therefore it is assumed that place names in Ruhaya could not be abstract objects which could be accounted for without reference to the social life of their speakers.

### **The concept of meaning**

Defining the term 'meaning' has been an issue debated by different philosophers for over 2000 years (Lyons, 1984). Lyons (op.cit, p. 136) defines the term meaning as:

“..... the ideas or concepts which can be transmitted from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the hearer”.

This suggests that, *meaning* depends on the minds of the speaker and the hearer.

On the other hand, Katz (1985) defines the term as a set of senses. In explaining the concept of meaning, he goes on by stating that, these senses are carried by signs which are used by a given society to refer to places or events. Hymes (1964, p. 33) points out that language signs involve three factors which are: the user of the sign, the sign itself and what the sign refers to. Hymes maintains that the meaning of the sign is well known by the native speaker of the language and it depends upon different social phenomena of a particular community where the language concerned is spoken. Closer to Hymes, Malinowski (1923) asserted that language must be conceptualized as a mode of practical actions which are meaningful within an indigenous system of action. The findings of this paper seem to support this view of meaning. One can not, for example, understand the meanings of Ruhaya place names without having knowledge about the social circumstances behind them. Good examples of such place names include: *Kyelima* (the name of the village which means *it cultivates itself* and *Kyebyara* (the name of the village) which means *it plants itself*. Without knowledge from the indigenous people of the relevant community, one may remain wondering whether the land can cultivate or plant itself. In fact these place names mean *the land is fertile* (good for cultivation or planting something). Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) in their Speech Act Theory refer to this kind of meaning as language meaning complexity. Thus, the direct meanings of these names correspond to the normal use of language while indirect meanings are referred as parasitic ones.

### **Meaning in context**

The study which deals with meaning in context is known as pragmatics. According to Wisniewski (2006), pragmatics refers to language use, i.e. the text in a given setting. This perspective was originally founded by Charles Morris in 1938. Pragmatics studies people's use of language as a form of behaviour or social action. It links language and human life in general (Verschueren, 1999). The linguistic phenomena to be studied from the point of view of their usage can be situated at any level of structure. So there are definitely no linguistic phenomena at any level of structure that a pragmatic perspective can afford to ignore.

On the other hand, Malinowski (1923) reveals that, a word without linguistic context is a mere figment and stands for nothing by itself. This implies that an utterance has no meaning except in the context of situation. The context of situation however, is not a setting but a theoretical construct for explaining how a text relates to the social processes within which it is located (Halliday, 1998). In relation to our study, Ruhaya place names ought to be meaningful within their contexts because they would probably reflect various social circumstances within the Bahaya community.

Giles and Coupland (1991) reveal the relationship between language and social context by showing how speakers choose language forms to suit their circumstances, perceptions and social phenomena. The study states that language is built upon the context in which it is encoded in order to have meaningful communication. Moreover, Kress (1990) asserts that different linguistic features which come about as a result of social processes are not arbitrary since they reflect ideological organization of a particular area of a social life.

However, Carter (1993, p. 23) argues that, in pragmatics, circumstances are not explainable at the grammatical level. Context is significant. Thus, place names in Ruhaya can not be understood out of context because in order to know that a particular name refers to phenomena like trees, mountains, body parts or a place, one needs to consult the context as suggested by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). This is based on the assumption that, a word, spoken or written is meaningful in some context of use; and the quality and effect of communication among people depends on contexts.

### **General review on sociolinguistic meaning of place names**

Levitt (1959, p. 94) explaining about England's place naming systems reveal that every field, parish, hamlet, village, town, city and county in England has a name of its own. The study states that place names show details of the life of ancestors. As regards the study of the origins of place names in England, Levitt (op.cit) adds that names of trees are often used to form place names. Some of relevant examples cited are as follows:

**Oakamoor** (in Staffordshire) 'oak tree that produces small nuts called acorns often eaten by animals'

**Birch anger** (in Essex) 'birch tree, with smooth bark and thin branches'

**Beech Hill** (in Berkshire) 'a tall forest tree with smooth grey bark, shiny leaves and small nuts'

Moreover, other things which can be learnt from England place names as stated by Levitt (op.cit), involve the features of the countryside, the areas of forest, the areas which were swampland, crops which were raised and even religious beliefs of the people who lived in a given area. These sociolinguistic observations are interesting and very useful in this paper because similar observations could be made regarding village names in Ruhaya. The following examples illustrate the situation in Ruhaya.

Trees which grew: **Mishasha** 'trees known as e-mishasha'.

Crops which were raised: **Kemyongu** 'of /having pumpkins'

**Kabira** 'small bush'.

Religious beliefs: **Kasalabani** 'on the small cross'.

As regards the types of place names in Yuwaalaraay, Yuwaaliyaay and Gamilaraay languages of north-west New South Wales, Ash (forthcoming) identifies three types of

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place-names that are *flora*, *fauna* and *topography*. Commenting on the meaning of place names in this language Ash says that many place names refer to vegetation, fauna, and types of soil and rocks of the country. However, this categorization fails to cope with the argument she made to the effect that some place names relate to body parts as the following examples cited verify:

<b>Place name</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>Yangledool</b>	Small vagina
<b>Terewah</b>	Narrow leg
<b>Nullawa</b>	Narrow forehead/face

From that point of view, Ash (forthcoming) states that she is not certain whether such names are metaphorical or they refer to ancestral beings.

Schotsman (2003) investigated the socio-geographical aspects of the transportation system in modern Tanzania. His main attention was on the socio-geographical aspects of the naming of bus stops, wards and hamlets (*vitongoji*) in Dar es Salaam. The major concern was determining where place names are located and how are they named. Discussing place names in Kiswahili, Schotsman pointed out that, place names may refer to tangible objects, occupations, well known persons, natural features, earlier vegetation and pioneering habitants. Schotsman's study suggested that there is need to investigate the meanings and sociolinguistic factors behind place names construction focusing on selected names of places in one Tanzanian language, in this case is Ruhaya language.

Kihore, et al. (2008, pp. 88-89) categorises place names in Kiswahili as proper nouns and some examples sighted were Musoma, Kigoma, Arusha, and Mtwara. It is asserted that place names, as one category of proper nouns, are distinctive compared to other categories of nouns. Thus, the names refer to things, concepts, and other living things that are different. In this case, place names would tend to have a high level of distinctiveness (presence or absence of the feature) whereby one place name is distinguished from other place names. It seemed interesting to find out the extent to which the process of naming places in Ruhaya was based on the distinctive features of a particular place which rely on powerfulness, dominancy and influence of the phenomena used in naming the place.

### **Sociolinguistic meaning of Ruhaya place names**

Ruhaya place names can be categorized according to the meanings they refer to. These include names relating to fauna and flora that existed in a given place, names relating to names of people or parts of human body, names relating to natural phenomena, belongingness, social-cultural behaviours/ mannerism and experienced events. In addition to that, the data discussed has shown that other names have been adopted from other languages due to migratory movements which may have taken place or because of associations.

### **Place names which refer to fauna**

Some Ruhaya place names refer to animals that lived in a particular area in the past. Place names relating to animals were selected basing on the population size of such particular animals. The quantity prompted people from neighbouring villages to use names of animal species found in a given area to refer to the place. See the following examples of Ruhaya place names:

**Example 1**

**Place Names**

**Kyenjubu**

**Kyebikobe**

**Kakajoju**

**Kankende**

**Meaning**

of hippopotamus

of big monkeys

of small elephant

of monkey'

Basing on the observations of the data presented above, it is revealed that some Ruhaya place names refer to fauna.

**Place names which refer to flora**

These are the names which are said to be derived from flora names found in an area. Place names under this category relate to names of trees, shrubs and grass. However various species of grass, plants and trees are (were) found in more than one place but there was no duplication of place names derived from those flora. Names were selected because of quantity (of tree, grass or plants) while some names were prompted by the size of trees i.e. big in size. Examples numbered (i) to (iv) illustrate the fact that some Ruhaya place names refer to flora.

**Example 2**

**Place Name**

i) **Kishebe**

ii) **Mishasha**

iii) **Kisheka**

iv) **Kyangohye**

**Meaning**

a type of grasses which are mostly found around water (many)

a type of trees known as *e-mishasha* (many)

a big tree known as *o-musheka*

of many plants known as *e-ngohye*

The fact that place names reflect various floras as described above, was also asserted by various scholars aforementioned in section 2.0 (see Levitt, 1959). From the examples presented above it was noted that Ruhaya place names also refer to significant flora which existed in the area.

**Names relating to food crops grown in an area**

Some Ruhaya place names refer to the food crops raised in a particular locality. However it is important to point out that even though the mentioned food crops are found in many places the names for those places are not the same because the selection of names of different places base on quantitative factor. Thus, place names are derived from the names of food crops which were produced in large or enormous than at other places. Observe the following examples:

**Example 3**

**Place Names**

i) **Kyaitoke**

ii) **Nyakigando**

iii) **Kemyongu**

**Meaning**

having bananas

having cassava

having pumpkins

However it should be noted that in Kagera region bananas are found everywhere but what prompted the name *Kyaitoke* was the presence of plenty of bananas in a given village due to soil fertility. Other names of food crops like pumpkins and cassava were assigned to villages or ward since those crops were produced in large quantity in those areas. From the discussion presented above, it is evident that places in Ruhaya were not named after

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just any crop. They were derived from the names of crops that were cultivated in large quantity in a given place.

#### **Names relating to habitation information**

Ruhaya place names under this category refer to the names of persons or a group of people who settled in the area. The names can be categorized into (i) *Individual Names* and (ii) *Nationality/Clan Names*. Individual names involve individuals who were considered by the community as notorious or famous for having done some peculiar things. Good example is the village name **Karugambwa** which means *belongs to a person whose name is Rugambwa* - a famous person who killed a buffalo. The selection and adoption of nationality or clan names base on the availability of a large number of people belonging to a clan or nation whereby the places where those people lived were named after the names of their clans or nationality. The names under this category are as follows:

##### **Example 4**

###### **Place Names**

- i) **Buyango**
- ii) **Kabajumba**
- iii) **Kabasingo**
- iv) **Rwabangereza**

###### **Meaning**

- belongs to Bayango clan
- belongs to Bajumba clan
- belongs to Basingo clan
- belong to the British

From the fact described in example 4 above, it has been revealed that Ruhaya place names depict some clans or nations where people living in those places belong. However, the selection of place names base on the number of people who first settled in a place which was named after their clans or nations.

#### **Names Relating to Significant Events**

Ruhaya place names under this category refer to significant events that took place in a given area. The examples below illustrate the argument:

##### **Example 5**

###### **Place Names**

- i) **Irango**
- ii) **Kifamutima**
- iii) **Kyeleta**

###### **Meaning**

- 'announcement' - the coming of the shortest people from Congo carrying local flutes (*e-nkuli*) which were used to call people when they had fallen down as they were not able to stand up on their own.
- 'the dead heart' - people had lost their humanity (the son of the ruler was killed in that village).
- 'it came itself' - no one knew how the river came up.

The events reflected from these place names are well understood by the speech community of Ruhaya. This is because each community experiences various important events from which its place names were derived. That event becomes an identity of a particular society, community or a nation which experienced the phenomena (Msanjila et.al, 2009, p. 55). The kind of events which qualify for the status of being selected as names include events relating to death of an important person like a ruler or his children (see for example the name *Kifamutima*), events which were causing extreme surprise (see for example the names *Irango* and *Kyeleta*) and events relating to the violation of some traditions and customs were of great concern. All in all, the examples discussed above reveal that some Ruhaya place names refer to some events which were experienced in a given area.

### Names which reflect social behaviours

Collective behaviour of individuals in the society was another factor for selection of some Ruhaya place names. Behaviour is a person's action or reaction to some situation basing on past experience or belief system. Human behaviour is an important factor in human society and each human has a different behaviour (Ardrey, 1970). Ruhaya place names reflect social behaviours of the people who lived in a given place too. The selection of some Ruhaya place names was based on the social behaviour especially when the behaviour of the society became the identity of the society. Thus, sometimes the society's behaviour dominated and attracted others irrespective of its positive or negative implication. This drew people's attention and that is when one comes across Ruhaya place names such as:

#### Example 6

Place Names	Meaning
i) <b>Bunywambele</b>	where people drink first (drunkard)
ii) <b>Kamwaga</b>	having disturbances (people who disturb others)
iii) <b>Butakya</b>	it won't become day light -an oath like word' (people who are not tired of fighting).

### 3.7 Names relating to natural terrain of the place

Some Ruhaya place names refer to natural features such as rocks, stones, mountains, sand, forest, valley and streams as described in the following examples:

#### Example 7

Place Names	Meaning
i) <b>Rubale</b>	small stones/pebbles.
ii) <b>Mishenye</b>	a lot of sand
iii) <b>Kasha</b>	a valley
iv) <b>Omwizinga</b>	in the island (means the village is surrounded by water during rainy season)

The examples described above can be cemented by the view pointed out by Msanjila (op cit) that each speech community inhabits some unique physical space that is not found in other communities. He adds that these features are used as an identification of a particular speech community where they are found. However, the selection of those names was based on the factors like the quantity of the particular features (e.g. the name *Mishenye*) and the physical characteristics of the natural features themselves (e.g. the names *Kasha* and *Omwizinga*). Therefore, the names of some natural features in Ruhaya were used to name the village where that phenomenon was found as the examples above verify.

### Names relating to human body parts

Ruhaya place names under this category relates to different names of human body parts such as napes, breasts, hips, and tongues as revealed in the following examples:

#### Example 8

Place Name	Meaning
(i) <b>Kyamabele</b>	of breasts
(ii) <b>Itako</b>	hip
(iii) <b>Omukikombo</b>	in the big nape
(iv) <b>Ichwandimi</b>	off the tongues

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The names above depict the fact that some villages are named after the names of human body parts. This point of view was noticed by Ash (forthcoming), in her study which dealt with place names in Yuwaalaraay, Yuwaaliyaay and Gamilaraay languages of north-west New South Wales as revealed in section 2.0. In Ruhaya naming after some human body parts was not intended to inform us about the real human body parts rather it resulted from semantic associations between the place itself and the events which took place in the past, the location of the place or physical appearance of the place. Thus, some place names are metaphorical. However, some refer to the physical characteristics of individuals who lived in the place. This can be proved by using for example the name *Kyamabele*. Thus, the name *Kyamabele* was referring to a particular woman who had big breasts, who lived in that village. All in all, the examples described above depict the fact that naming is not only significant linguistically, in being metaphorical for example, but socially as well, in preserving the memories of the people concerned some socially significant happening.

### **Place names adopted from other languages**

This category refers to place names adopted from other languages apart from Ruhaya. However, the adopted names are generally reshaped to fit Ruhaya phonological patterns by inserting sounds to make words fit into its phonological system. Therefore, we come across village names such as:

#### **Example 9**

##### **Place Name**

(i) **Nyabushozi**

(ii) **Bagidadi**

(iii) **Kasalabani** [kasalabani]

##### **Meaning**

many small mountains/hills (from Runyambo vocabulary *busozi*)

from the name of the capital of Iraq' (from Persian language)

on the cross (from Swahili language)

The examples above depict that some Ruhaya place names were named after the names from other languages and the names adopted were modified to fit Ruhaya phonological inventory. However, the adoption of some names from other languages was caused by either migration (e.g. the name *Nyabushozi*) or the influential events which took place (e.g. the name *Bagidadi*). It was also noted that even new beliefs which became popular motivated naming places by using names which were connected with such beliefs (see the name *Kasalabani*). From this point of view, it was evident that the adoption of some Ruhaya village names from other languages was motivated by some social contacts or associations with various social aspects.

### **Conclusion**

From the analysed and discussed data, the paper reveals that Ruhaya place names do have sociolinguistically peculiar meanings. Ruhaya place names do therefore have a referential semantic value whereby some refer to fauna, flora, crops raised, personal names, tribe and people's nationality. Also, they refer to social cultural beliefs, social behaviors, different events, human body parts and occupational information. Generally, Ruhaya place names reflect what Ruhaya speech community see, hear, believe and experience. Indeed place names in Ruhaya are selected or constructed basing on sociolinguistic circumstances or phenomena that influenced the society. Since the paper was limited to Ruhaya names of villages, one can conduct a similar study on other names of administrative units such as the names of districts, divisions and even regions in the same language or in other Bantu languages.

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