

---

## A morphosyntactic and semantic analysis of toponyms among the Luhya: A case of Bungoma County

---

Lucy Mandillah<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Institute of Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Studies, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya. [lmandillah@mmust.ac.ke](mailto:lmandillah@mmust.ac.ke)*

\*Corresponding author

Received: 27 January 2022, Accepted: 17 March 2022, Published: 25 April 2022.

---

**Abstract:** Onomastics, the study of names has remained an area of marginal significance in research despite its importance in language studies. This paper conducts a morphosyntactic and semantic analysis of toponyms (place names) among the Luhya group of speakers in Western Kenya, Bungoma County. A structural and functional approach is used to analyse the naming patterns with the idea that African names, as signs of language, can be divided into two morpho-syntactic categories: nominal that is, they constitute single words, or syntagmatic, meaning they are made up of sentences or phrases. Purposively sampled thirty place names are selected from the IEBC inventory and nine key respondents from the nine sub counties. The 30 names are subjected to morpho-syntactic analysis whereas the semi-structured interviews are used to elicit data on etymology and meaning of names from the nine respondents within the framework of the Frame Semantic theory by Fillmore, (Fillmore, 1982). The theory is used to ascertain whether the meaning-making elements in the respective toponyms reflect the historical functions and meanings embedded within the names. The findings reveal that Luhya place names are generated through grammatical rules as a result of word transformations. Such names are generated from nominals and their resulting phrases through derivational morphology. Three word formation processes namely, pre-fixation, compounding and borrowing are exhibited in the naming process. Semantically, the study reveals that Luhya place names are transparent and descriptive in terms of their function. Places are named after topographical features, historical events, climatic conditions and prominent people.

**Keywords:** Inflectional morphology, Luhya, Morpho-syntax, Onomastics, Semantics, Toponyms

**Biographical notes:** Dr. Lucy KL Mandillah is a Senior lecturer in the Department of Language and Literature Education at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya. Lucy holds a Doctorate degree in English and Applied Linguistics from Kenyatta University (2016), Kenya; a Masters of Arts degree in English and Linguistics from Kenyatta University (2006) and a Bachelor of Education Arts degree in English Language and Literature in English from the same university (2002). Dr Mandillah has also pursued a one-year Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship (PDRF) program at the University of Venda, South Africa (2017-2018). Lucy has sustained a research focus on English language, African linguistics (Bantu Languages), Language education, Gender and youth manifestations in language, Language acquisition, Phonetics and Phonology, Morphology and Semantics, Ecolinguistics, Communication and culture. To date, she has authored and co-authored various publications in peer reviewed journals on these themes. Lucy continues to contribute to the academic community through her research contributions in various international conferences and workshops. She is involved in the teaching and supervision and co-supervision of several Masters and Doctorate students. Currently, she is serving as the Deputy Director, Institute of Indigenous Knowledge & Cultural Studies at the University.

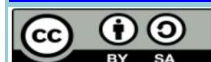
---

### 1. Introduction

According to Lipka (2000), native languages are filled with homegrown information, morals and attributes that make a speech community. Lipka further notes that indigenous languages also help people to develop solid associations and identity with their traditional customs, practices and heritage. Place names, also called toponyms reflect the identity of a place and also narrate a communities' heritage and history which is an indicative of the multiculturalism in a 'multilingual coexistence context (Guillourel, 2003). Similarly, Mbiti (1990) discerns that the meanings embedded in nearly all African names originate from the African beliefs, practices and antiquity. Consequently, toponyms have

---

**Research Article:** This article is published by *Jozac Publishers* in the *Journal of Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies (JLLLS)*. This article is distributed under a Creative Common [Attribution \(CC BY-SA 4.0\) International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/). **Conflict of Interest:** The author/s declared no conflict of interest.



always had a historical bearing among several communities in the world (Jenkins, 2004). On the same note, the process of naming places is inextricably linked to political, geographical, cultural, sociological and linguistic changes in different parts of the world (Gill, 2005, cited in Horsman, 2006). According to Anderson (2007: 169) for example, names are an essential linguistic category due to their referential function in communication. Kharusi and Salman (2011) also posit that apart from ethnic settlement patterns, names of places also points at key milestones in the immigration of some people or communities. For these reasons, place names have become an avenue of studying the emergence current personalities. Names of countries, provinces, villages, cities among other locations are politically sensitive and symbolic of different historical events and activities because they guarantee, in part, the international and national recognition.

As a result, much interest in research on the linguistic forms of African names has emerged in the recent past. Such studies are being conducted mostly among West and South African countries. Among the leading studies there is (Mohome, 1972; Akinnaso, 1980; Suzman, 1994; Essien, 2000; Koopman, 2002). However, Linguists in East Africa, Kenya in particular have not done much on onomastics (Lipka, 2000) despite the importance of names as units of analysis in language studies. Furthermore, the focus on the meaning of names dates back to Aristotle and Plato in language philosophy. Yet, studies focusing on names have been basically been ignored in language theory and practice notwithstanding the fact that names are basic language material. On the same note, whereas Onomastics has considerably added to the comprehension of the structural intricacy that numerous names exhibit etymologically, their morphological form has not yet received full consideration. In a similar vein, the Kenyan Constitution (2010) also has clauses that concern the use of indigenous languages and cultures. The example given is from article 7 (3) which compels the state to promote and protect the language diversity among the Kenyan citizens in addition to promoting the growth and practise of indigenous languages including other forms of communication which suits all citizens. It is against this premise that this paper attempts to present the grammar of *Luhya* language as demonstrated in the structure (morpho-syntax) and function (semantics) of its indigenous african place names with a focus on Bungoma County, Kenya.

Kenya, like other African countries, is a multilingual and a multicultural country. It comprises of over seventy (70) languages and dialects. The languages according to CIA, (2014), include Gikuyu (22%); Luyia (14%); Dholuo (13%); Kalenjin (12%); Kamba (11%); Kisii (6%); Meru (6%); other African ethnicities comprise of 15% of the population and non-African ethnicities comprise of 1% of the total Kenyan population. According to CIA, Kenya covers an area of 580 367 square kilometres and borders Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan. According to the 2019 Census report, Kenya's population is estimated to be about 48 Million. With such an enormous population, the practice of naming places has increased in Kenya with the emergent of new locations such as the inception of the devolution governments in 2013. With the coming up of the 47 Counties, new names for sub-counties, municipalities, wards and even villages were coined due to the new demarcations. Bungoma, one of the 47 Counties was not left out.

Among the over 70 languages spoken in Kenya, the Luyia group of speakers is the second largest ethnic group after the Gikuyu. The Luyia comprise of 17 mutually intelligible dialects having its place in the larger Bantu linguistic group. Some of these dialects include *the Tachoni, Bukusu, Banyala, Logooli, Bamarama, Baidakho, Baisukha, Batiriki, Bakisa, Bamarachi, and Basamia*. Most of the Luhya speakers occupy the Western part of Kenya and some parts of the Rift Valley such as Tranzoia County. The four Counties in the Western part of Kenya which the Luyias occupy are, Kakamega, Bungoma, Busia and Vihiga Counties. For the purpose of this study, Bungoma County which is occupied by *Ababukusu, Abatachoni* and a few *Abatura* speakers was sampled out. The aforementioned 17 Luyia dialects have a characteristic feature of employing the pre-fix *aba-* or *ava-*, to mean "of" or "belong to" according to research. For example, *Avatachoni* means "people of *Tachoni*."

Consequently, naming patterns are still very important to the tradition of African people, *Luyia* included since names have remained custodians of a community's cultural heritage, history and identity. The *Luyia* for example, have enshrined memorable activities in names with particular on specific meanings. For example, the naming pattern of people involves children being named after seasons, time of birth and ancestors such as grandparents or great-grandparents who passed on. For example, the name Wafula (for a boy) and Nafula (for a girl) would mean "born during heavy rains," while Wekesa (for a boy) and Nekesa (for a girl) would mean "born in the harvest season."

Golele (1993: 85) contends that names are invented as a result of varied social, political, economic as well as legal situations which mirror the society or community in which they are instituted. African names according to Mokgokong (2004) are normally meaningful in the sense that they can assist members of a community pinpoint a region in addition to its past. De Klerk and Bosch (1996) is also in tandem with Mokgokong by observing that naming is explicitly a linguistic act which is closely related to ideals, mores, expectations, anxiety and happenings in people's lives. Despite these naming patterns and the mandate from the Constitution of Kenya (2010), to the best of my knowledge, little linguistic research has been published that focuses on structural and functional linguistic labels of place names among the *Luhya* of Bungoma County, a focus of this paper. The paper is divided into two segments, the morpho-syntactic (structural) and the semantic (functional) segments of place names. First, the structural elements utilized in the formation of place names are discussed followed by processes involved in the formation of words. Second, an analysis of the social as well as the functional denotations rooted in the place names are presented in reference to the social and cultural traces that gave rise to their establishment.

## 2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to conduct a morphosyntactic and semantic analysis of toponyms among the *Luhya* group of speakers in Western Kenya, Bungoma County. The derived meanings are used as sources of data to investigate further through interviews into the motivations that initiated the giving of such names.

## 3. Research methodology

The study made use of an exploratory qualitative research design. The design as applied in this study aimed at providing detailed descriptions and explanations of the selected place names. Names which formed the unit of analysis for this study were purposively sampled from the IEBC's voter's register for Bungoma County. A total of thirty (30) names of places were selected randomly from the register. The IEBC register has an updated version of all available Luhya place names within the County. In-depth interviews were conducted among purposively sampled nine (9) elders from the nine (9) sub-counties to elicit the knowledge they had about the motivations behind the names given to the identified places. It was assumed that elders are custodians of the history, tradition and culture of a speech community hence know the histories of places and are knowledgeable about the eras in question. The interviews gave room to in-depth responses and gave insight in the respondent's feelings with regard to the motive behind selected place names. This activity was conducted within the frame semantic theory which operates on the premise that any word (noun) that is used for communication comes along with its own peculiar meaning in cognizant of which the user or listener might not be able to encode or decode the full meaning of such an utterance. Consequently, the study employed in-depth interviews with elders and analyzed documents to gather information. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated and then thematically analyzed. Apart from the interviews, the researcher also used her intuition and linguistic knowledge to provide a semantic analysis of the names, their possible etimologies and morphological structures. Notes from both sources of data were then used to present the findings thematically.

## 4. Findings and discussions

The paper analyzed selected names at their morpho-syntactic and semantic levels. The former deals with the internal structures in terms of morphemes that exist within the place names while the latter deals with the meaning embedded in the identified words.

### 4.1. Morpho-Syntactic Analysis of Selected Luhya Place names

It is imperative to understand that Luhya belongs to the Bantu language family. Bantu languages are agglutinative in that they employ an agglutination of affixes; prefixes, suffixes and roots or stems to build words to establish their morphological structures. The Bantu languages noun morphological surface structures generally are either a stem only or prefix + stem, augment + prefix + stem, and augment + stem (Nurse, 2000). The morpho-syntactic analysis of Luhya place names entailed structural morpho-syntactic processes behind place names construction. Text analysis was used to analyse selected names from the IEBC's voter's register. The morphological formation of the names under study were analyzed as follows:

#### 4.1.1. Pre-fixation

Pre-fixation is a morphological procedure which entails the embedding of a bound morpheme to the anterior of the core word.

**Table 1: Pre-fixation**

S. No.	Prefix	Root	Place name
1.	e-	Bungoma	Ebungoma
2.	e-	sikusi	Esikusi
3.	e-	mapera	E mapera
4.	e-	Kapchai	EKapchai
5.	e-	mabanga	Emabanga
6.	e-	lukulu	E-ukulu
7.	e-	kavula	Ekabula
8.	e	mwivale	Emwivale
9.	e-	Bondeni	Ebondeni
10.	e-	Milima	Emilima
11.	Wa-	Dina	Wadina
12.	Wa-	Wangamati	Wawangamati
13	Wa-	Sambu	Wasambu

Pre-fixation process has been used to transform Luhya common nouns such as *sikusi*, *mapera*, *kavula*, *milima*, *mwivale*, *bungoma* into place names. The identified Luhya place names have roots and affixes. These affixes are the locative prefix {e} and the possessive prefix {wa-} which are attached to root nouns to indicate locality through the morphological process of insertion. All place names share the locative prefix -e and wa- but different root words that denotes the actual place. For example a common noun such as [Bungoma] is composed of two elements; the prefix {e} and the root {bungoma}.

The same process applies in the formation of other place names. The preliminary letter of the derived place name is capitalized the moment the process prefixation is finalized, as is the norm with all proper nouns to derive the place

name “*Ebungoma*.” The identified locative prefixes {e-} and {wa-} exhibit a regular pattern. The prefix {wa-} precedes places that are named after prominent persons such as *Wadina* (the place of Dina), *Wawangamati* (the place of Wangamati), and *Wasambu* (the place of Sambu). On the contrary, the prefix {e-} is versatile in the sense that it precedes the rest of the roots that denote physical features, natural phenomena, events and activities apart from personal names. In both cases, an inflectional approach to Morphology is shown since the locative prefixes {e-} and {wa-} attached to the root words do not change the grammatical categories of the names involved. For instance the word [mapera] is a common noun. When the locative prefix {e-} is attached to it, a proper noun [Emapera] is derived. Similarly, [Wangamati] is a proper noun that denotes a the name of a person. When the locative prefix {wa-} is attached to it, the place name [Wawangamati] remains a proper noun that denotes the name of a place.

From the examples given in table 1, it is evident that the locative prefix {e-} is more productive in the formation of most place names than the possessive prefix {wa-}. This could be attributed to the fact that the locative prefix {e-} is versatile in the sense that it precedes the rest of the root nouns not necessarily personal names which are preceded that name places after prominent people, who are normally few in society. These results are not unique among the Luhya alone. The prefixation process has been reported among other African languages whose toponyms have the trait of locative prefixes such as Sotho {Ga} (GaDikgale), Nguni {Kwa} (KwaMashu), Venda {Ha} (Hamasia) and Tsonga {eKa} (eKa Mhinga) (Mojapelo, 2009).

These results indicate that names of places among the Luyia of Bungoma County are generally derivatives of nouns and noun phrases. The results are therefore, in support of Mojapelo who provides evidence using nouns from Northern Sotho. In Northern Sotho, most names of places are generated from proper nouns which name places as well as common nouns through the morphological process of affixation. Among the Japanese on the other hand, Backhouse (1996) accounts that the pre-accenting suffix {-shi} is a sign of names of cities. Prasithrathsint (2007) further reveals that Thai place names are made of the generic and the specific name. An analysis along these lines not only applies to Luyia place names but is also totally in agreement with the patterns witnessed in studies on associated phenomena in other languages.

#### 4.1.2. Compounding

Compounding according to Katamba (1993) and Malmkjear (1995) is a practise where two autonomous words unite to generate a single word. Compounding among Luhya place names is exhibited in table 2 below:

**Table 2: Compounding**

S. No	Prefix	Root	Root	Compound place name
1.	e-	Makina	Masilu	Emakina masilu
2.	e-	Daraja	mbili	Edaraja mbili
3	e-	Tee	Junction	Etee Junction

From the above examples, two lexemes (words), each with a full lexical meaning are joined together to form a compound word. For example, the common noun [makina] in isolation means “stones” whereas the adjective [masilu] in isolation means “stupid”. Consequently, it becomes possible for a person to derive meaning from the compound by discriminating independently the meaning of the components which form the compound. The borders of the components are also very conspicuous. When the two words are joined, they form a compound noun [makina masilu] literally ‘stupid stones.’. In order to derive a place name from the compound noun, a prefixation process is involved. Thus, the locative prefix {e-} is attached to the compound [makina masilu] ‘stupid stones’ to derive the place name [Emakina masilu] meaning “where there are stupid stones”. The same process of compounding then prefixation to derive the place name applies to the remaining compound words.

Notably again, in the above examples, the compounds entail a generic term which is used to show the item to which the name refers to as in *daraja* for bridge and a specific word which qualifies the generic term as in *mbili* for two to literally mean “a place of two bridges.” It is evident that compound place names are not common among the Luhya of Bungoma County from the examples given. However these examples serve to show that compounding is a possible word formation process among the Luhya.

#### 4.1 3. Borrowing

Borrowing is a word formation process which involves the importation of linguistic items from one language to another. According to Hoffer (2002), borrowing can occur any time when two linguistic systems and cultures are in interaction over a period of time.

**Table 3: Borrowing**

S.No	Prefix	Source language word	Nativized Place name	Source language (SL)
1.	e-	bondeni	Epondeni	Kiswahili
2.	e-	makutano	Emakutano	Kiswahili
3	e-	milima	Emilima	Kiswahili
4	e-	Daraja mbili	Etaraja Mbili	Kiswahili

5	e-	Come to Kuywa	Ekamukuywa	English+Sabaot
6	e-	chai	Ekapchai	Kiswahili
7	e-	kimilili	Ekimilili	Sabaot
8	e-	chesamisi	Echesamisi	Sabaot
9	e-	freight	Efuroyi	English
10	e-	Tee junction	Eteejunction	English

The borrowed place names among the Luyia as shown in the examples given in table 3 above such as *bondeni*, *makutano*, *milima*, *kapchai* among others are a reflection of cultural and language contact between different communities. When places among the Luyia community are assigned names from English or other African languages such as Kiswahili and Sabaot, there is usually an adaptation of the spelling to suit the the pronunciation of the target language (TL).

This happens through the process of nativization in which the borrowed place names are adapted in order to suit into the structure of the Target Language (TL).The names have been borrowed either from Kiswahili, English or other neighbouring African languages and then nativized by attaching the Luhya locative prefix {e-} before the borrowed name. For example, the word *bondeni* is a Kiswahili word that means “valley”.In order to nativise the name *bondeni* to refer to a place, the Luhya locative prefix {e-} is attached to the iswahili word “bondeni” in order to derive the place name “Ebondeni.” Also, there is a phonological process of substitution among souns that is exhibited. The voiced Kiswahili bilabial stop /b/ is nativized by being substituted with the Luhya voiceless bilabial stop /p/. The same process of prefixation and substitution of sounds occur in other borrowed words such as ‘Etaracha mbili.’ Thus, ). Nativization is a common practice among speech communities that gives foreign names local pronunciation and orthography.

The borrowed and subsequently nativized place names are as a result of the advent of Western cultures, the invasion of missionaries, Arab influence, migration, trade, marriages which have had an impact on the naming patterns of the African people and Luyia in particular. Crossbreed forms comprising of parts parts from different language are actualized. In the nativization process , the locative prefix {e-} from the TL is attached to an existing root of the source language (SL) in order to nativize the place name. In this case, the SLs are Sabaoat, Kiswahili and English. The nativized names of places lose their original meaning, and most of the time make no sense in their newly assumed orthography and pronunciation in a stand alone position.

#### 4.2. Semantic Analysis of Place Names

This section presents and discusses the semantics of selected place names and goes ahead to establish the etymologies of such names. Semantics of names and their etymology are related and, therefore, it is paramount to deal with them at the same time for a unified interpretation of their meanings. Names all over the world carry with them meaning according to the Frame Semantic theory by Fillmore (Fillmore, 1982). The semantic analysis therefore, entails different strategies adopted to give meaning to places of names among the Luhya of Bungoma County within the Frame semantic theory. To arrive at these meanings, in-depth interviews were conducted among nine elders who were purposively sampled from each of the nine (9) Sub-Counties within Bungoma County. The researcher believed that the elders aged 60-90 were custodians of indigenous and historical knowledge of the identified places. In determining the semantics of the place names, the study employed thematic analysis where meanings were categorized thematically as follows:

##### 4.2.1. Topographical Place Names

These are names which describe some features of the landscape such as valleys, rivers, streams, hills as well as human created features such as roads and buildings as exemplified in table 4 below:

**Table 4: Topographical place names**

S.No	Place name	Topographical feature	Frame-Semantics (Meaning)
1	Emihuu	Stream	A place near a stream called mihuu
2	Elukusi	Type of soil	A place characterized by red loam soil
3	Ebondeni	Valley	A place of valleys
4	Esinoko/Esirenda	swamp	A swampy place
5	Emwikhupo	Water falls	A place where water falls
6	Emwivale/Emwikina	Stone	A place where there is a huge stone
7	Emisemwa	Type of tree	A place where a fruit tree called grow
8	Emilima	Hills	A place with hills/mountains
9	Emalaha	Type of shrubs	A place with many shrubs called
10	Ematisi	Fish ponds	A place with many fish ponds
11	Ematili	Temporary structures	A place with many temporary structres
12	Elwanda	A rock	A place with a big rock
13	Esango/Emisanga/Makutano	Road Junction	A place where different roads or rivers converge
14	Esikulu/Elukulu/Khulukulu	Mountain	A mountaneous or hilly place
15	Mmakina Masilu	Stupid Stones	A place with many disorganized stones
16	Enzoia	A river	A place next to a river called Nzoia
17	Emaraka/Esirakarur/		

18	Esikusi	A dome shape	A land which has dome shape. On each side of the village are rivers.
19	Emapera	Quavas	The place was full of guavas or a place of many guava trees
20	Ekavula	Boundary	A place where there is a boundary separating two communities
21	Emitoto	Fig trees	A place with many fig trees
22	Ekapchai	Tea (Trees)	A place where the white settlers first experimented the growing of <i>chai</i> meaning 'tea'.
23	Ekhalava	river	A place with a river that has clear water

Naming places according to the topographical landscape is evident among the Luhya as shown through the examples in table 4 above. Place names have been ascribed based on particular descriptive physical features in the environment such as hills, valleys, rivers, type of soil, vegetation and streams or artificial features such as road junctions. The topographical names are also picturesque in the sense that they capture and describe the photographic shapes of the respective features. Thus, the place names are used as tools of describing the features in relation to how they meet the landscape, how the names are coined in response to the landscape's "behavior" or in relation to the link the landscape has with historical event(s). For example, Mr. Enos Kakai said that the name '*Elwanda*' (A place with a big rock) was driven from the existence of the rock which is extremely big that serves as a distinguishing feature from other neighbouring places. It is through this outstanding rock that one can easily identify it from far or use it to give directions.

Closely related to the philosophy behind place names is the metaphorical naming. For instance, a place such as '*Emakina Masilu*' (A place where there are stupid stones) in Bungoma East is metaphorical. The name is a compound word comprising of two parts, that is a noun '*Emakina*' (stones) and the adjective '*masilu*' (stupid). Put together, the name literally means stupid stones. How can stones be stupid? Metaphorically, yes, they can be stupid. When we interviewed Mr. Simiyu Malia, a resident of the place, he reported that the naming was based on the fact that the stones are disorganized in appearance. Therefore, the name captures a place where there are many stones resembling one another in a crude disorganized manner.

According to Mr. Chris Nanguba, places such as *Emaraka*, *Esirakaru*, *Emapera* and *Emalaha* were given in accordance with the kind of vegetation that existed in the named locations. *Emaraka* synonymous to *Esirakaru* according to the respondent are names bestowed on numerous thick shrubs called "*amarakaru*." Before population explosion in the County, most places were characterized by this kind of vegetation. The names still exist to date, even at a time when the shrubs have disappeared due to human encroachment. This is evident that toponyms provide valued insights into significant geographical information of a particular region or society.

Apart from vegetation, places are also named in reference to water bodies such as rivers, streams and ponds which are close to the named locations. For example, according to Mary Nafula a resident of Ekhalab, *Ekhalava* was named after a perennial river called *khalava* located in Bungoma West, literally meaning 'the one that is clean' The name came from the observation that this particular river has clear/clean water compared to other neighbouring rivers. It is this unique characteristic of clear water that the locals used to emphasize, hence the source of the name. We can thus argue that the place got its identity from that of the river.

To add to this, places are also named in reference to the type of soils. For example, the word *olukusi* according to Ellam Mutali literally means 'red loamy soil'. *Elukusi* therefore, literally means a place that has red loam soil. In this example, {e-} is the locative prefix for place whereas the root {*lukusi*} means 'red loam soil'. Besides rivers, type of soils, water falls, mountains and valleys, there are other man made features which vividly describe the way the features meet the eye. Such synonymous place names include *Emisanga*, *Esango*, *Etijunction* and *Emakutano* which literally refers to places where either different rivers, streams or roads converge. For instance, the place name "*Emisanga*" comes from the root verb {*Sanga*} which literally means "meet" or "put together". Similarly, the borrowed Kiswahili place name "*Emakutano*" literally means "where they meet/converge" The names capture vividly the way roads and rivers converge at a certain point. This is characteristic feature is common among Kenyan roads. It is this peculiar feature of the place that givers of place names decided to emphasize on, hence the derivation of its name.

These examples of place names are in line with Payne's (1996:1134) observation that some shapes or appearance of some geographical features being unusual evoke visions that elicit appropriate names that describe the vision given. Payne's observation is not far from what characterizes the naming of physical features among the Luhya. A close analysis names of places identified point to the fact that when the names were being coined, people selected a unique or outstanding feature that they wanted to emphasize on such as a hill, a valley or a river. The same view is echoed by Raper, (1977) who opines that events, appearance, situations, topographical phenomena topographical phenomena, the presence of water, species of fauna and flora determine to a large extent names given to places. According to him, these natural features are significant to the community apart from identifying and locating places.

#### 4.2.2. Animals, birds and insects place names

According to the interviews conducted, Ellam Mutali, Simiyu Malia and Mary Nafula pointed out to the fact that the sampled place names were also named after animals, birds and insects as exemplified in table 5 below:

**Table 5: Animals, birds and insects**

S.No	Place name	Animal/bird/insect	Frame-Semantics (Meaning)
1	Emavusi	Goat	A place where there are goats
2	Emakheese	Sheep	A place where there are sheep
3	Emakhanga	Guinea fowl	A place where there are guinea fowls
4	Evituyu	Squirrels	A place where there are squirrels
5	Emakhanga	Guinea fowl	A place where there are guinea fowls
6	Echesamisi	Bufallo	A place where there are bufallos
7	Ekimilili	Leopard	A place where there are leopards.
8	Enavingéngé	Mosquitos	A place where there are mosquitos

As denoted from the examples given in table 7 above, locations can also be named depending on which animal, insect or bird is common within the place. For example, Ellam Mutali points out that the name *Emakheese* literally meaning “a place where there are sheep” depicts as such. The same applies to places such as *Emavusi* (a place where there are goats), *Evituyu* (a place where there are squirrels), *Ekimilili* (a place where there are leopards), *Enavingéngé* (a place where there are mosquitos). The name givers coined these place names such as *Ekimilili* and *Evituyu* to depict the events of that time. It might not be true that many squirrels still inhabit the place called “*Evituyu*” now. Also, places are named after the totem animal considered to be closely connected to the clan that inhabits the location instead of naming a place by use of a direct name of the traditional leader. For instance, *Emakhanga* (a place where there are guinea fowls), is a totemic name of one of the major clans inhabiting the place according to Mr. Simiyu Malia.

**4.2.3. Places named after Activities, Historical events and Climate conditions**

The naming of places after activities, historical events and climatic conditions is a powerful way of communicating a community’s way of life. The meanings of the identified places were given from interviews conducted among respondents as shown in the examples given below:

**Table 6: Activities, Historical events and Climate conditions**

S. No	Place name	Activity/Event/climate	Frame-Semantics (Meaning)
1	Ekamasielo	Business	Where they buy and sell hides
2	Enamamuka	Agriculture	Where they harvest guards
3	Esitavicha	Circucision rite	
4	Echetambe	War between white man and the Luhya community	Where the war between the white man and the Luhya occurred
5	Emavanga	War between the Sabaot and the Tachoni	Bloody area
6	Esitikho	Fetching water	A place where water is fetched from
7	Ebungoma	Settlement	A place where the Abang’oma people settled initially before they were pushed to Mt Elgon by Babukusu when they migrated from Uganda.
8	Ekapchai	Agriculture	A place where the white settlers first experimented the growing of chai meaning ‘tea’.
9	Eluuyia	climate	A warm place
10	Enamunyiri	climate	A cold place

Examples of place names such as *Ekamasielo* (where they buy and sell hides), *Enamamuka* (Where they harvest guards), *Echetambe* (Where the war between whites and the Luhya occurred), *Esitikho* (Where they fetch water from), *Eluuyia* (a warm place) among others have their names driven from important historical events like wars and activities such as settlement, business and agriculture according to Wekesa Ndeke an elder from Webuye West. Also the climatic condition of a place, according to Mary Nafula, dictated the name of a location such as *Eluuyia* which depicts “a warm place.” The name bestowers felt such activities and historical events should not be forgotten. In other words, what happened and sometimes it could still be happening is historically and permanently summarized in the form of a place name. To understand such names, a person must be conversant with the entire historical and/or socio-cultural background leading to the choice of the place name. For example, historical names such as ‘*Echetambe* and *Emavanga*.’ The names are nouns driven from free morphemes (nouns) *Chetambe* (a name of a person) and *Mavanga* which denotes ‘blood.’ By adding the locomotive prefix {e-}, the place name *Echetambe* literally means “the place of *Chetambe*.” This name denotes the Chetambe fortress which was erected on the land of a Luhya elder by the name Chetambe. It is historically known that the whites invaded the Chetambe fortress and killed several Luhya people (Bukusu). The hills and the location where the fortress was located are known by the name *Echetambe* up to date. Similarly, *Emavanga* (Where there is blood) is known by that name as a result of war that occurred between the *Tachoni* and the *Sabaot* at that particular location. During that war, many people died by shedding of blood, hence the name *Emavanga*. This is according to Eningilo, a 90 year old elder from Webuye East Sub-County.

In the same vein, places are also named after cultural events of a clan or tribe. For instance, the place name “*Esitavicha*” according to Simiyu Malia denotes the place where the *Tachoni* (one of the 17 Luyia group of speakers within Bungoma County) circumcision ritual called *okhulicha* is always held every December of an even year. Cultural events are vital to African communities since customary rituals believed to be influential in cleansing the spirits are observed. Such cultural related names are therefore, very unique and very important. It is important to note

that names of places relating to events, situations as well as climate conditions symbolize a reminder to the people's experiences and serve as the storage for historical facts that surround the naming patterns.

**4.2.4. Places named after prominent persons (Heritage Place names)**

Honorific and commemorative names are used to refer to people in authority or to people who own land including someone who has a link to the particular place (Mokgokong 2004). The purpose is mainly to honour and commemorate them. Examples of such place names among the Luhya are given in table 8 below:

**Table 7: Prominent persons**

S.No	Place name	Prominent persons	Commemorable role
1	Enameme	Nameme	Bukusu Traditional Religious leader
2.	Emuliro	Muliro	Luhya prominent political leader
3.	Wawangamati	Wangamati	Prominent Luhya leader
4.	Wadina	Dina	Prominent business lady
5	Ewasambu	Sambu	Person in authority

The above place names denote honorific and people to be commemorated who were considered important in the eyes of the Luhya community. This was according to Mr. Ellan Mutali, one of the elders who admitted that: “*important people should be honored through naming places after them.*” According to him, prominence or reputation could be picked up through achievements such as positions of leadership for instance traditional leaders, council of elders, headmen, political leaders, community elders, religious leaders among others.

For example, Mr. Mutali said that *Emuliro* is a place name denoting a prominent Luhya political leader, called Masinde Muliro. There are several other places including learning institutions, stadia and recreational parks that have been named after him such as Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Muliro Gardens and Masinde Muliro Stadium. *Enameme* is another place name which denotes the famous *Bukusu* traditional religious leader called Elija Wa Nameme, founder of “*Dini ya Musambwa*” (Church of spirits). The headquarter of the church is found at a place called *Enameme*. In the same ambit, the place name *Wawangamati* (the place of Wangamati) denotes the location where the first mayor of Bungoma Municipality (presently Bungoma County) lived.

In other circumstances, people are honoured through naming as result of their impact to the progress of the community in various fields such as agriculture, education, business and health. For instance, *Wadina* (The place of Dina) according to Kakai is named after a prominent female business woman in Webuye town called Dina. In this case, the possessive prefix {wa-} means ‘owner of’ followed by the root {*Wangamati*} or {*Dina*.} in order to derive the place aforementioned place names. Literally, one can easily infer that the names are driven from the fact that the person is said to own the place which serves as its distinguishing feature.

These results are in line with Goldstein, (1978:119) assertion that the assigning names to places after historical record, is an influential way of communicating the achievements of prior generations as well as outlining community heroes for posterity. On the same note, Azarayahu, (1996) notes that historical names symbolize nature and helps to reveal the past of a place be it a village, location, town, city, church, country or school.

**4.2.5. Summary of the Results from the Study**

The paper has analysed the morpho-syntactic and semantic aspects of selected *Luhya* place names from Bungoma County within the Frame semantic theory. Naming of a place among the *Luyia* is determined by the community as a whole since it is one of the key activities of the community. *Luhya* place names constitute morphologically regular, predictable patterns of inflection that involve three inflectional morphological processes namely, Prefixation, borrowing and compounding. Prefixation is the most productive among the three processes. Thus, the names of places can be analyzed morphologically resulting from the agglutination word formation principle common in the morphology of the Bantu. For instance, the identified toponyms are characterized by the locative prefix {e-} (*Emihuu, Esinoko, Elukulu*) and the possessive prefix {wa-} (*Wadina, Wawangamati*). The place names could be disintegrated into two parts where by one the part constitutes the word as a place name, and the other gives a referential component to the word.

There is an interplay between morphology and semantics to have further additional and complete meaning. This interplay gives the place names a new face of meaning. In this case, the morphological structures have been used to add meaning to place names. Thus, various prefixes morphemes also have various semantic values and characteristics due to partially semantic classes into which Bantu nouns are derived. According to Mathews (1972), morphological rules which exist in every language are used to determine the combination of morphemes in the formation of words. Among the *Luyia*, place names just as names of people are not mere labels but crucial features of the language. From a grammatical point of view, results have demonstrated that the grammar of the *Luyia* language is majorly embedded in names of places. This enables someone to learn language from names given to places since they are derivatives and part of the lexicon of the language.

The results also show that *Luyia* place are generated in most case from nouns and NPs while a few are compounds of nouns and adjectives. In addition, other names have been nativized from the borrowed words. The borrowed words are assimilated into the *Luyia* language in order to suit into the morphological structure of the language. The nativized borrowed names are as a result of language contact through settlement and intermarriages. The results are therefore in support of Akkinasso (1980) who studied *Yoruba* names. According to Akkinasso, there exists a special characteristic among African names in addition to the complex linguistic and semantic structures that are commonly

correlated to the African value system. According to him, Yoruba names are derivatives from nouns, NPs as well as entire sentences. In addition, the current study has established a link between theoretical linguistics and the study on names (onomastics).

Using the Unified theory of names in analyzing the semantics of Luhya place names in Bungoma County, the findings of this study assert that Luhya place names like any other African names are not mere arbitrary labels. These names have a semantic value with denotative meanings. According to the Unified theory, for a complete sense or meaning of a name to be arrived at, both the linguistic (denotative) sense and the onomastic (connotative) sense should be blended together, (Hang'ombe 2015). The denotative and connotative meanings are traced by learning the origin of such name. This is in tandem with Olenyo (2011) study findings on the Semantics of the Lulogooli personal names. It is further justified by Swian (1957) who holds that the various attributes associated with a name and its sense is what makes that name to be meaningful. It is vividly depicted from the findings that place names among the Luhya of Bungoma County have denotative meanings which are socially and culturally oriented. Each toponym denotes a certain thing in the world or natural environment. The natural and artificial features; animals and birds; activities/events and prominent persons are taken into consideration when it comes to naming places. This is evident that both living and the non-living have an exceptional place in the history of the Luyia community. Names derived from natural features like hills, rocks and valleys are in most cases descriptive and subsequently lexically transparent. From the analysis of such names, it is revealed that generic terms normally refer to heights and depressions (*Ebondeni*), the presence of water, (*Esinoko*), settlement (*Ebungoma*) and demarcations (*Ekabula*). They may also be descriptive in terms of the colour of soil (*Elukusi*); fauna or flora encountered at the location (*Esirakaru, Emapera, Emalaha*); type of rock (*Emwivale*); climatological conditions (*Eluuyia, Enamunyiri*); persons in power (*Ewasambu*) or to land owners (*Wawangamati*) as well someone with connections to a place. To name a place after a prominent or revered people is an honour to the person from a traditional point of view. Despite their diverse ethnic ancestry, it is evident that the Luyia community has a historical background in relation to intermarriages, local trade, shared social and cultural practices which could be attributed to their similarity in naming patterns.

## 5. Conclusion

A morphosyntactic and semantic analysis of selected place names among the Luhya of Bungoma County was the focus of this research. Selected toponyms were randomly selected from the IEBC's voters register. The primary source of data was through interviews and text analysis from secondary sources. The study was conducted at the levels of morphology, syntax and semantics as well as the inspiration for the naming of the various places. The findings revealed that the Luhya place names undergone three morphological processes namely; prefixation, compounding and borrowing (nativization). It was revealed that the motivation for the giving of the various toponyms was as a result of the topography of places, historical concurrences, climatic conditions among others. This study therefore proves that Luhya people have place names as part of their naming practices and that these names are linguistic signs which could be subjected to a linguistic analysis at morphological, syntactic and semantic levels.

## References

- Anderson, J. M. (2007). *The grammar of names*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Akinaso, F. N. (1980). The Socio-linguistic Basis of Yoruba Personal Names. *Anthropological Linguistics* 22(6) 275-303.
- Fillmore, C. (1988). The Mechanisms of Construction Grammar. *BLS* 14: 35-55.
- Goldberg, A. (2003). Constructions: a new theoretical approach to language. *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences*. 7(5), pp. 219-224.
- Goldberg, A. (1995). *A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hang'ombe K. (2015). *The Morphology and Semantics of Tonga Anthroponyms: The Case of Given Names and Nicknames*. Unpublished MA dissertation, UNZA: Lusaka.
- Hockett C. F. (1960). 'The Origin of Speech'. *Scientific America*, 203 : 88 – 111
- Horsman, S. (2006) The politics of toponyms in the Pamir mountains. *Area*, 38(3), 279-291.
- Hoffer, B (2002). Language Borrowing and Language Diffusion. *Intercultural Communication Studies Journal* XI:4 2002.
- Katamba, F. (1993). *Morphology*. London: Macmillan Publishers
- Jenkins, E. (2004). Symbols of nationhood. Presidential address, South African Institute of Race Relations. Braamfontein, Johannesburg. 32 p.
- Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) (2019). Census. Available at: <https://www.knbs.or.ke/>
- Kharusi, N. S., & Salman, A. (2011). The English Transliteration of Place Names in Oman. *Journal of Academic and Applied Studies*. 1(3), pp. 1–27
- Lipka L. (2000). Word-Formation and (Proper) Names: A Neglected Field. In: C. Dalton-Puffer and N. Ritt (Eds.), *Words: Structure, Meaning and Function: Trends in Linguistics*(pp187-203). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Mathews, P.H. (1989). *Morphology: An Introduction to the Theory of Word Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mojapelo, M. L. (2009). Morphology and semantics of proper names in Northern Sotho. *South African Journal of African Languages* 29(2): 185–194

- Olenyo (2011), *What is in a Name? An Analysis of Semantics of Lulogooli Personal Names*. Tanzania. Urusha University
- Prasithratsint, A. (2007). Principles of Thai place-name formation: a reflection of natural and cultural heritage. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 186: 59–73.
- Payne, R.L. (1996) In E. Eichler, G. Hilty, H. Löffler, H. Steger and L. Zgusta (eds.), *Namenforschung/Name Studies/Lesnomspropres*, vol. 2, 1133–1141. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Raper P. E. (1989). *A dictionary of Southern African Place Names*. Second edition, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- Van Langendonck, W. (1998). A typological approach to place name-categories. *Proceedings of the XIXth International Congress of Onomastic Science. Scope, Perspectives and Methods of Onomastics (Aberdeen 1996)*, 342–348. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen.
- Van Langendonck, W. (2007). *Theory and typology of proper names*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

