



A semantic and etymological analysis of lukabararas borrowed forms of toponyms: Tracing meaning through language contact

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ABSTRACT

Despite the prevalence of borrowed forms of toponyms in Lukabararas, there is little scholarly attention paid to how these toponyms acquire meaning and cultural significance through language contact. This study analysed toponyms in Lukabararas whose forms are borrowed from Nandi, Maasai, Swahili, and English, focusing on their etymology and resultant meanings. Specifically, the study examined how these toponyms are formed by tracing the etymology arising from language contact and analysing the context-specific meanings reflected in their borrowed forms. A descriptive research design was adopted within the framework of the Causal Theory of Names. The study comprised 42 purposively sampled Lukabararas speakers drawn from the seven county assembly wards of Kakamega North Sub-County. A total of 30 toponyms were collected through focus group discussions and analysed qualitatively using content analysis. The findings revealed that, regardless of the source language, the borrowed forms of toponyms were nativised to conform to the phonological structure of Lukabararas and that their meanings were strongly shaped by the sociohistorical contexts in which they emerged. Based on these findings, the study recommends further documentation and systematic analysis of toponyms in contact zones to preserve linguistic heritage and deepen understanding of the cultural processes embedded in place naming.

Keywords: Borrowing, Borrowed Form, Etymology, Lukabararas, Semantics, Toponym

I. INTRODUCTION

A toponym refers to a place name and encompasses the systematic study of the origin and history of such a name (Monmonier, 2006). Kadmon (2000) observes that place names can be highly revealing, offering insights into a community's physical geography, cultural practices, history, and demography. Moreover, toponyms are considered special types of names that encapsulate the lived experiences of the people who use them, carrying individual and collective identities that foster continuity across generations (Mphande, 2006).

Scholars argue that naming is not merely a process of labelling but a deeply cultural practice governed by its own system. The basic process of naming involves identifying the sources from which names are derived but this may vary across cultures. In some societies, names are drawn from deities or natural entities, yet, people tend to prioritize the meanings of names in the naming process (Layne, 2006; Löbner, 2008). In light of this, Coates (2013), suggests two approaches in naming places which include use of environmental factors or the descriptive approach. Hence, the present study used the descriptive approach to explain why certain places were given the names, how they got them, and what it means to be so-named.

According to Löbner (2008), the meanings of most words are complex, consisting of multiple semantic components such that the meaning of a lexical item can be analysed by identifying its constituent parts and how they are combined. In this sense, semantic analysis works as a reverse process of composition, where the meaning of a complex expression, such as a toponym, is determined by understanding the meaning of its components (Kibet, 2016). There is need to examine how toponyms function as linguistic and cultural signifiers that reflect the socio-historical realities and worldviews of the communities that coin and use them. Therefore, by exploring the semantic and cultural dimensions of place naming, the present study sought to uncover the question of what the sources of toponyms in Lukabararas are and whether there is a causal relationship between the etymologies and the ensuing meanings within the specific cultural context of the borrowing language.



1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the widespread presence of borrowed toponyms in Lukabaras, there is limited research into how these place names acquire meaning and cultural significance through language contact. Existing research on toponymy in Kenya often focuses on indigenous naming systems, yet little attention has been paid to how borrowed forms from languages such as Nandi, Maasai, Swahili, and English are adapted, nativized, and semantically reinterpreted within Lukabaras. This gap obscures an understanding of how linguistic borrowing interacts with local cultural contexts to shape the semantic, historical, and identity-laden dimensions of place naming. Consequently, the processes through which borrowed toponyms are formed, the nature of their etymological transformations, and the culturally anchored meanings they acquire remain insufficiently understood, necessitating a systematic analysis within the Lukabaras linguistic landscape.

1.2 Research Objectives

The main objective of the study was to analyse the etymology of toponyms in Lukabaras that are structurally formed through language contact and further examine the resultant meanings constructed and expressed through the borrowed forms of the toponyms

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 The causal Theory of Names

The Causal Theory of Names (Evans, 1985) proposes analysing the meaning of proper names by relating a name to its referent in the real world. The theory explains that an object's possession of most of the descriptions associated with it is not important; rather, the object is the dominant source of the descriptions we associate with the name. Therefore, for there to be a link between the real world and the speaker's or hearer's meaning, there must be causal relations. For example, speakers of Lukabaras use the toponym *Eteresia* and believe that it is a name because there is a connection between the name and the speaker's use of and knowledge about it. Evans (1985) shows that causal relations are the connections between a named entity's state and the speaker's knowledge of its meaning. According to the theory, identifying the actual or intended meaning of place names involves identifying a community using the word to refer to a place, where the place itself is the dominant source of information associated with the name. This demonstrates that meanings can be understood only by going back to the etymology of the toponym.

2.2 Conceptual Review

Communities have varying linguistic abilities and this uniqueness can often be found in toponyms which are known to reflect not only the physical characteristics of a toponym but also the linguistic and historical characteristics of the community. Hence, the meaning a name has depends on the context of its usage, and we should not consider the meaning of a name independently of its referent and other associations. According to Tent (2015), studies in toponymy can focus on the etymology, origins, meaning of the toponyms or it may also concern itself with patterns of some regional toponyms. For this reason, Tent (2015) argues that there is an explanation regarding the origin of every toponym. For instance, it is argued that a toponym can be given by someone, at a particular time and for a particular reason.

In view of the foregoing argument, Kibet (2016) asserts that the meaning of a word is derived from its usage in a particular context. For instance, if someone asked a young person whether, when they come of age, they would want to live in Runda or Kibera in Nairobi, the response could be denotative or connotative. The meanings of the two names may not be limited to their denotation but could also bear other associations - such as differences in class, with Runda representing a suburban area and Kibera a humble estate (literal and modified occurrences of proper names). The semantic value of an expression (name) is determined by the speaker's intention together with features of context. The vocabulary of a language plays an important role as a window into the universe of knowledge of its speakers and their view of the world. On this basis, the present study investigated the etymology and semantics of borrowed forms of toponyms in Lukabaras. Lewis *et al.* (2021) states that Lukabaras is part of the Luhyia macrolanguage family. It is spoken in Malava Sub-County and the neighbouring Nandi County and Uasin Gishu County. The Kabras are the primary speakers of this language, which is also known as Lukabarasi (Sasala *et al.*, 2019).

Avraham (2004) posits that every location possesses a distinct history that significantly influences the identity of both the locale and its inhabitants. So, people recall toponyms due to their significance, shaped by personal experiences and historical knowledge (Urde *et al.*, 2007). For example, in one study, certain locations identified with specific individuals in the hope that the person's traits would permeate the location.

As a result, being known as the home of a famous person helps spread awareness of the site and ensures its continued existence, even if that person lived in the distant past. That is how the idea of legacy follows naturally from



this (Avraham, 2004). According to Olson (2002), an entity can have more than one name, and people will select the appropriate name for a particular communicative situation. Olson argued that naming is a means of structuring reality, it imposes a pattern on the world that is meaningful to the namer. Each of us names reality according to our own vision of the world, built on meanings derived from our own experiences. Naming is, therefore, not a random process, even though it is varied (Olson, 2002).

Crystal (2006) argues that semantics aims to establish the properties of meaning in a systematic and objective way with reference to a wide range of utterances and possible languages. He further asserts that the meaning of a word should not be sought in isolation from what it refers to; simply put, a word in itself does not carry much meaning. This captured one of the motivations of this study, seeking to establish the contextual meanings of given place names.

Leech and Thomas (2002) observe that connotations are relatively unstable; they vary considerably according to culture, historical period, and individual experience. He further notes that connotative meaning is intermediate and open-ended in the same way our beliefs and knowledge about the universe are open-ended. Any characteristic of a referent identified objectively or subjectively forms part of its connotative meaning and entails the communicative value a word has over and above its purely conceptual meaning. From these arguments, it is clear that the meaning a name has depends on the context of its usage, and we should not consider the meaning of a name independently of its referent and other associations.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

We adopted a descriptive research design to investigate the etymology and semantic dimensions of borrowed toponyms in Lukabarás. The design was appropriate because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of naturally occurring linguistic forms and the meanings attached to them by native speakers. The approach relied on native speaker intuition to determine the correctness and cultural relevance of the data obtained.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

A multistage sampling strategy was employed. First, the researcher identified the seven wards that make up Kakamega North Sub-County (KNSC). Using purposive sampling, six native Lukabarás speakers were selected from each ward, yielding a total of 42 key participants. These participants were organized into Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) of six members each. Although Sasala (2023) suggest that an FGD may comprise six to twelve members, this study preferred smaller, gender-homogeneous groups to ensure a comfortable and free environment for participation. The study area was selected because of the presence of multiple place names whose forms appear non-native to Lukabarás, signaling possible language contact influences.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through structured, face-to-face Focus Group Discussions guided by an FGD schedule. The instrument consisted of two sections, the second containing questions designed to elicit discussion on the etymologies and meanings of selected toponyms. During the discussions, participants identified place names, provided possible historical and linguistic origins, and discussed their context-specific meanings. All responses were digitally recorded and supplemented with researcher field notes.

3.4 Data Analysis

The recorded data were transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and analysed qualitatively using descriptive content analysis. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in the etymological sources of the toponyms, examining how borrowed lexical forms were adapted into Lukabarás, and interpreting the semantic meanings ascribed to these forms within their cultural contexts.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical research protocols. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the research and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were free to withdraw at any point. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by excluding personal identifiers from transcripts and reports. Digital recordings and transcripts were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.



IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The study sought to investigate the meanings attached to the borrowed forms of toponyms from Lukabarar with regard to their etymologies. Since the toponyms were outcomes of contact between Lukabarar and other languages, there was need to establish the etymology and culture specific context in which the meanings of the forms of toponyms applied. This was informed by the need to establish the influence of context as regards origin on the meanings of toponyms derived from other languages such as Nandi, Maasai, English and Swahili on Lukabarar. According to the causal theory of names, there are causal relations which are the connection between a named entity's state in relation to the speaker's knowledge of its meaning. According to the theory, identification of the actual or intended meaning of the place names involves identification of a community using the word to refer to a place, and that the place itself is the dominant source of information the people associate with the name. This shows that the meanings can be got only by going back to the etymology and context in which the place name was created.

We established that denotation is the first ordinary meaning which is not affected by contexts or emotional overtones associated with the act of communication. The denotative meaning of a word constitutes a major part of the shared system of a language for all speakers (Kibet, 2016). However, a further analysis showed that all the borrowed forms of toponyms in Lukabarar have contextual meanings based on their etymologies. The study revealed that some places were named after the physical features present, others after names of animals and birds and others after activities that took place in the area. Some of the connotative meanings such as *Mawaya* were positive and others like *Samitsi* were negative.

These findings were similar to Kibet (2016) who established that all Kipsigis toponyms bear denotative and connotative meanings. Kibet revealed that some places were named after the physical features present, others after names of animals and birds and others after activities that took place in the area. Connotative meanings such as modernity were positive and others like never dawning were negative.

4.2 Semantic Categorization of Toponyms in Lukabarar

The data was semantically analysed to establish the denotative meanings of toponyms as shown in Table 1 by first grouping the toponyms into categories based on whether they were derived from the description of a place, physical features, the activities in a place or names of people, names of plants and animals. A similar study by Kihara (2020) classified toponyms in Maasai into seven categories of meaning: colour, vegetation, natural products, topography, animals, overall character of the area, and legends (Kihara, 2020). Of the seven categories, six are directly about the environment, a feature that Kihara (2020) attributes to the Maasai's love for and appreciation of the environment. The toponyms are indicators of the Maasai's keen observation of nature which is reflected in the language they use to name places and these toponyms are records of the historical migration and settlements of the Maasai in Kenya. The very presence of these toponyms indicates the places the Maasai had inhabited which also form part of their historical and cultural repertoire. Evidence for such toponyms is useful to historians, including historical linguists, in explaining or tracing the spread of an ethnic group as well as the history of the language and its influence, through cultural contact with other languages. Kiharas study had similarities that informed the analysis of toponyms in Lukabarar in which the following categories were established.

Table 1

Toponyms Derived from the Description of a Place

Primary level meaning	Semantic derivation
<i>Tairi mocha</i>	Place with one tyre
<i>Pulesi Emu</i>	Place with road sign labelled 'M'
<i>Kona</i>	Place with a sharp corner
<i>Tuka mocha</i>	Place of one shop
<i>Samitsi</i>	Place of foul smell

The names generated from the description of a place were from Swahili, English and Maasai. For example, the toponyms *Tairi mocha* and *Tuka mocha* were from Swahili, *Pulesi Emu* and *Kona* were from English whereas *Samitsi* was derived from Maasai. Example 1: *Tairi moja*: The toponym *Tairi moja* was derived from the description of a place where there was a car tyre put on the road side as a way of identifying the place, thus, referred to as *abundu wetayiri yindala* (meaning a place of one tyre). Since the description in Lukabarar sounded long and wordy, the borrowed form from Swahili '*Tairi moja*' was derived and nativized into Lukabarar as '*Tayiri mocha*'. Example 2: *Tuka mocha*

The toponym *Tuka mocha* was derived from the description of a place where there is only one shop which translates to *Duka Moja* in Swahili. However, the equivalent name for *Duka moja* in Lukabarar is *abundu welituka lilala* (meaning a place of one shop). The findings established that instead of such unnecessarily long, wordy description for



a toponym, it was more convenient to use the borrowed form from Swahili which was nativized into Lukabarar as ‘*Tuka mocha*’.

Example 3: *Pulesi emu*. The findings established that the toponym *Pulesi emu* was opaque because it did not refer to anything in the physical world. Although the word *pulesi* is a nativization into Lukabarar from the English word ‘place’, on the other hand, the word *emu* had an unresolved etymology. Nevertheless, the responses from the FGDs remained highly speculative that it probably referred to the first letter of the name of a person who lived around there.

Example 4: *Samitsi*: The toponym *Samitsi* was derived from the Maasai. Since the Maasai were environmental conservationists and forbade hunting of wild animals and wanton destruction of the flora for reasons that they got their medicine from the plants as well as grazing their animals, they were disappointed to find a lot of destruction of the vegetation when they settled in parts of Kabaras. For this reason, they referred to the place as rotten ‘*samis*’ due to poor conservation of the ecosystem.

Table 2

Toponyms derived from physical features

Primary level meaning	Semantic derivation
<i>Mukayi</i>	Place of stones
<i>Teresia</i>	Place of small hills and valleys
<i>Chegulo</i>	Place of small hills

The data in Table 2 presents examples of toponyms that show that the contact between the Nandi and Kabaras provided the historical and linguistic background which served as the origin of some toponyms in Lukabarar. The toponyms are not only indicators of how the Nandi’s valued the physical environment but also reflect the historical migration and settlements of the Nandi in Kabaras. The very presence of toponyms such as *Mukayi*, *Teresia* and *Chegulo* are evidence of the places the Nandi inhabited and such names form part of the historical and cultural account of the contact between Nandi and other languages such as Lukabarar.

Example 5: *Mukayi*, *Teresia* and *Chegulo*: The study established that historically, the Nandi occupied some of the said places largely as grazing land and when they migrated, the names of the places would later be nativized into Lukabarar. It was established that the words in Nandi from which the toponyms *Mukayi*, *Teresia* and *Chegulo* were derived, described places that were full of stones, small hills and valleys respectively. For instance, *mukay* is a large stone whereas *teres* describes small hills and valleys and *chegulo* is a small hill.

Table 3

Toponyms Derived from Names of People, Plants and Animals

Primary level meaning	Semantic derivation
<i>Malava</i>	Place owned by Malava
<i>Chebwayi</i>	Place owned by Chebai
<i>Chesero</i>	Place of shrubs
<i>Chimoron</i>	Place full of shrubs
<i>Chimang’eti</i>	Place of hyenas

Example 6: *Chebwayi*: The toponym *Chebwayi* in Nandi was derived from the name of a group of the Nandi people who were the descendants of a person called *Chebai*. It was revealed that historically *Abachebai* (the descendants of *Chebai*) once lived in the place that would later be nativized into Lukabarar and be known as *Chebwayi*.

Example 7: *Chesero* and *Chimoroni*: The study revealed that toponyms such as *Chesero* and *Chimoroni* were derived from the names of plants. For instance, it was established that *Chesero* and *Chimoroni* were places full of shrubs at the foot of the Nandi escarpments and they were grazing areas long before the Nandi were driven up the mountain by the Kabaras. It was found that the Nandi words from which these toponyms in Lukabarar were derived are *keser* and *kimoron*. The findings revealed that these are common nouns that refer to certain types of shrubs.

Example 8: *Kimang’eti*: The findings revealed that the Nandi once occupied a place in East Kabaras which was a place that was inhabited by hyenas. The toponym in Nandi became *Kimang’et* (place of hyenas). However, the word *Kimang’et* was nativized to *Chimang’eti* or *Echimang’eti*. The study observed that whereas the phrase (place of hyenas is ‘*Emanani*’), the toponym retains the borrowed form of the word and the native form for historical reasons.

As shown in Tables 2 and 3 all the toponyms generated from physical features, names of people, plants and animals were derived from Nandi. The Nandi differentiates many plants based on their value for animals and other values, for example, their usefulness for livestock as grazing lands. This was equally reflected in the places they named after plants or types of vegetation. Therefore, it was established that the Nandi association of the physical environment with types of vegetation, was an indication that they considered the typography to be of prime importance to their livelihood or to give life through herding. This was revealed through toponyms such as *Koli*, *Teresia*, *Chesero*,



Chimoron and Chimang'eti: Through these examples the findings indicated that the Nandi esteemed different kinds of vegetation and to feed their livestock they occupied mountainous and green or leafy environment.

Table 4

Toponyms Derived from Activities

Primary level meaning	Semantic derivation
<i>Mawaya</i>	Place of cable connections
<i>Maramu</i>	Place of digging murrum
<i>Machinjoni</i>	A slaughter house
<i>Wesiti Kenya</i>	A cane factory in western Kenya
<i>Harambee</i>	Place of common human activities <i>Tuka mocha</i>
<i>Tuka mocha</i>	Place of one shop
<i>Stenti mayindi</i>	Place for selling cereals

The category for toponyms formed from activities were derived from Swahili and English. They included *Mawaya*, *Maramu*, *Machinjoni*, *Wesiti Kenya*, *Harambee*, *Tuka mocha* and *Stenti mayindi*. Unlike the meanings of toponyms from languages such as Nandi and Maasai which had historical background, the toponyms in Swahili originated from the integration of the borrowed words as loan words. This was partly because there was no equivalent name in Lukabararas for things such as *duka*, *waya*, *west*, *stendi* and *murrum*.

Example 9: *Tuka mocha*: *Tuka mocha* was derived from the description of a place where there is only one shop described as *Duka Moja* in Swahili. However, such a description in Lukabararas would be wordy and unnecessarily long (abundu *welituka lilala*; meaning a place of one shop). The findings established that instead of such a long description for a toponym, it was more convenient to use the borrowed form from Swahili thus '*Tuka mocha*' which is a nativized form into Lukabararas.

Example 10: *Stenti mayindi*: The toponym *Stenti mayindi* described a place on the roadside where cereals were sold especially maize. It was established that people in the locality would go there at that particular point to either buy or sell maize. Therefore, it became a 'maize trading point'. The toponym is thus a combination of two common nouns in Swahili thus, *stendi* meaning waiting point and *mahindi* meaning maize. The phrase loosely translates to 'a place of waiting for maize'. The description is borrowed into Lukabararas a toponym as *Stenti mayindi*.

Example 11: *Harambee*: *Harambee* is a Swahili word meaning to pull together. The findings revealed that in Lukabararas the toponym *Harambee* which is borrowed from Swahili was the description of a place in East Kabaras where people could meet whenever there was a matter that called for communal intervention.

Thus, pulling or coming together to resolve a matter was referred to as 'doing harambee'. The place would later take on the toponym *Harambee*, which was a description of the activity that took place.

Example 12: *M'machinjoni*: *Machinjoni* is a Swahili word that describes a place where animals are slaughtered, or a slaughter house. Such places are common points in some markets where animals are slaughtered and the beef or mutton taken to butcheries for selling. Thus, the word was borrowed from Swahili and integrated into Lukabararas as *M'machinjoni*.

Example 13: *Wesiti Kenya*: The toponym *Wesiti Kenya* was generated the description of the direction in which one of the major sugar factories in the area is located. The factory is located towards the western part of Kabaras. The findings showed that the English form of the word was west Kenya but when borrowed into Lukabararas it is nativized to *Wesiti Kenya*.

Example 14: *Mawaya*: The findings revealed that the toponym *Mawaya* was derived from the activities of power line constructors who had a cable or wire station at a particular point in East Kabaras. However, whereas the description in English is a compound word 'wire station', the borrowed form in Lukabararas was reduced or clipped to a single word, thus, *Mawaya* to refer to a place of many wires or cables.

Example 15: *Maramu*: The toponym *Maramu* was derived from the activities of road constructors who were digging or excavating murrum from a certain place in East Kabaras. The description in Lukabararas became *abundu wa maramu*; which meant a place of murrum in English. The borrowed form in Lukabararas simply became *Maramu* derived from the English word murrum.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study revealed that whereas the borrowed forms of toponyms in Lukabararas were derived from other languages such as Nandi, Maasai, Swahili and English, many of the toponyms were derived from the Nandi. The reason for the prevalence of toponyms from Nandi was historical; the Eastern part of Kakamega North was inhabited by the



Nandi before they moved further east to the escarpments. Nandi is also a neighbouring community to Lukabarar and there is a lot of interaction between the two speech communities. However, irrespective of the language from which the toponyms were created, the borrowed forms were largely nativized to fit into the phonological structure of Lukabarar. Significantly, the analysis aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of Evans (1985), in the causal theory of names through which the results demonstrate that causal relations establish the connection between a named entity's state and the speaker's comprehension of its meaning.

The analysis revealed that discerning the actual or intended meaning of the toponyms in Lukabarar necessitated tracing the connection between the community that employed the toponyms and the communities that served as the primary source of information associated with the toponyms. This indicates that the meanings of the toponyms in Lukabarar could only be derived by examining their etymology through the relations that obtained due to language contact. The study concluded that although there were semantic variations in the borrowed forms of the toponyms, the origins of the names were context specific as seen through categorization of the toponyms based on physical features, names of people, animals and objects in the natural environment.

5.2 Recommendation

The study recommends that future linguistic and cultural research on Lukabarar toponyms should further document and preserve these borrowed forms as part of the community's intangible heritage. Since many of the toponyms have Nandi origins due to historical settlement and continued intercommunity interaction, it is important to promote collaborative linguistic studies between the Lukabarar and Nandi communities to trace shared cultural histories. Additionally, local education and cultural programs should integrate the study of place names to enhance awareness of their semantic, pragmatic, and historical significance. Finally, further comparative analyses of nativized toponyms across neighbouring languages could provide deeper insights into language contact, borrowing, and identity formation in the region.

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