Linguistic and socio-cultural aspects in Interlacustrine Bantu names

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Abstract

Although naming is a natural phenomenon in all human societies, there are differences not only in the process(es) used by different societies to assign names to people, things, animals, places, or natural and supernatural phenomena, but also in what these names tend to stand for. Whereas in some societies names are either arbitrarily picked up or inherited and bear very little, if any, semantic and sociocultural significance, in many Bantu societies and Interlacustrine groups in particular, names have synchronic meanings and are intended to play a certain role in social life. This paper analyses personal names from Interlacustrine languages spoken in East Africa between Lakes Victoria, Tanganyika and Albert. Since the linguistic area referred to is extensive, the paper draws specific examples from Ruhaya and Runyambo (Rutara languages) and Kinyarwanda and Kirundi (Western Highlands languages). The basic method applied is morphological analysis, whereby names are broken into functionally meaningful morphemes (attached to roots/stems) which help to decipher the meaning of the entire name. Then, by grouping names with related forms and/or meanings, the collective sense underlying the group is determined. As a result, the paper suggests a morphological model of classifying names.