

Nicknaming and Nicknames in Xitsonga Culture: An Onomastic Study

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ABSTRACT This paper deals with nicknames and their significance among Xitsonga speaking people. Vatsonga have the tendency of giving nicknames, which act as tokens of appreciation or disapproval. Nicknames are one of the forms of address, which Vatsonga as a nation uses to either praise or show disapproval of a person's behavior. Amongst Vatsonga, in informal situations, first names are often used interchangeably with nicknames. This form of address is commonly used by peers in particular age groups namely, children, adolescents and young adults. This practice is also common among friends. It is rare to find the elderly using this form of address because they prefer to use pet or endearment names when addressing their children. This paper is mainly a semantic analysis of Xitsonga nicknaming and nicknames by bringing to the reader's attention the circumstances that led to the names given to the referents.

INTRODUCTION

The term nickname is used to describe a name that identifies a person and differs from the formal name. According to Chauke (2005: 150), the equivalent Xitsonga term for a nickname is *vito ro divulela*. Kennedy and Zamuner (2006: 388) are of the view that a nickname is simply a referring expression that identifies an individual and that differs from the formal given names of the referent. Chauke (2005: 151) further adds that a nickname can be used to send out a critical message to friends, enemies and neighbors in order to avoid direct confrontation.

Finnegan (1970) in Chauke (2005: 161) also reinforces the above viewpoint when she says that using a nickname, as a critical device is not uncommon in oral cultures. In essence, a nickname usually acts as a cohesive social attribute indicating warmth and solidarity. This view does not rule out the fact that a nickname may be used as a powerful signal of disrespect. It all depends on the intention of the name giver. Herbert (1992: 348) in turn observes that "nicknames may be either self-selected by an individual or imposed by others". Makondo's (2014) ethnographic paper investigates dog names used in Wedza district of Mashonaland East province of Zimbabwe. Makondo (2014: 201) points out that dog names are used to implicitly or explicitly address divergent marriage and societal chal-

lenges. Insights are also drawn from Chauke's (2015) semantic analysis of the Xitsonga personal names and naming practices by bringing to the reader's attention the circumstances that led to the names given to the name bearers. Chauke (2015) contends that naming a newly born child is not independent of the society in which events occur. The circumstances surrounding a child's birth account for a variety of reasons behind the naming of children. This paper also benefits from Chauke's (2015) discussion of name changes in South Africa in an effort to promote and rediscover the country's identity, culture and heritage. According to Chauke (2015: 291), the names people give their geographical areas provide a unique source of information about a society's history, beliefs and values.

METHODOLOGY

This paper provides a semantic analysis of the Xitsonga nicknames and the circumstances under which the names were given. The article mainly uses the qualitative approach as it is located in the interpretative paradigm. According to Scale (1998) in Ndlovu (2014: 19) interpretivists tend to favour qualitative rather than quantitative methods because people's worlds provide greater access to their subjective meaning than do statistical trends. This is also support-

ed by Sengani (2008: 393) maintains that “names are discourse and therefore fall within a naturalistic inquiry which is best explored through a qualitative descriptive method”. This infers that the qualitative descriptive research methodology was found to be more appropriate. Furthermore, the in-depth interviews were also used to solicit data.

RESULTS

This paper has proved that nicknames are part and parcel of Xitsonga culture. This means that Vatsonga consider nicknames as one of the most important forms of address. Furthermore, it has been noted throughout this paper that nicknames are not viewed as mere linguistic labels but linguistic innovations that foster group unity. Nicknames were also analysed in terms of their meanings and the analysis revealed that nicknames are given in relation to social behaviors of the name bearers. This infers that nicknamers are very critical and observant of the way people behave themselves.

DISCUSSION

Types of Nicknames

Nicknames originate from different points of view such as behavior traits, physical attributes, sentimental attachments or stereotypical associations and work environment. There are different types of nicknames. In the following paragraphs, these different types of nicknames will form the core of the discussion.

Nicknames Relating to Physical Appearance

Nicknames are sometimes given in direct reference to body features or deformities. The names acquired in this type of nicknaming reflect the bearer’s unique peculiar physical appearance as seen and judged by friends, peers or even community members (Sebashe 2007: 161).

N’wamahlo

N’wamahlo is a nickname given to a person with protruding eyes. According to Chauke (2005: 253), the referent’s eyes are of unusual size and resemble those of an owl. This nickname is a derogatory name and cannot be ut-

tered in the presence of the name bearer.

Khwirixatika

The nickname *Khwirixatika* may be given to a person who has a protruding stomach (*kh-wiri*), which resembles that of a pregnant woman. The nickname *Khwirixatika* may be insulting, offensive and derogatory. The name is only uttered in the absence of the referent.

Xilebvú

The name *Xilebvú* (cheek) is used for a bearded person who loves to grow a beard and is easily recognized by it, as it has become his trademark. The nickname *Xilebvú* is regarded as a colorful and pleasant name in that the name bearer enjoys being addressed by it.

Mabihana

The nickname *Mabihana* may be given to a very ugly person as well as to a very cruel person. However, the name bearer may start liking the name to such an extent that when he is extremely happy, he will call himself by it.

The above examples of nicknames may serve merely as a form of humorous observation to prove that nicknames do not always have a negative implication.

Nicknames Relating to Behavior Traits

Nicknames may be given to people in relation to their behavior. Names acquired in this type of nicknaming reflect the bearer’s character as seen and judged by parents, friends, peers or even community members (Sebashe 2007: 162).

Ncindzu

Ncindzu is derived from the Xitsonga proverb *U nga tiendli ncindzu makukula-kule* (Do not be like a palm tree which sweeps far away). The name *Ncindzu* (palm tree) may be given to a person who has more time for his friends than for his home or relatives (Junod and Jacques 1957: 348). Chauke (1992: 20) describes the origin of the nickname as follows:

Munhu loyi u fananisiwa ni murhi wa ncindzu lowu marhavi ya wona ya kukulaka ekule ni le

ntshinyeni ra wona, ivi thyaka ri sala ri lo pyi kwala ntshinyeni.

(This person (name bearer) is equated with the palm tree whose branches sweep far away from the stem, leaving rubbish heaped near the stem)

The name thus refers to a person who does not care for his family but roams about and enjoys being in the company of his friends only.

Xidakwa

Xidakwa is a nickname, which may be given to a person who is frequently or habitually drunk. The nicknamed does not control his appetite for intoxicating liquor or home-brewed beer. The habitual drinking renders him incapable of managing his family affairs. According to Chauke (2005: 164-165), the name bearer does not have time to stay and enjoy life with his family. He is addicted to such an extent that he wakes up in the early hours of the morning and goes out of his kraal in search of the home-brewed beer. The name may also be given to the drinker who goes from party to party and knows the taste of all the home-brewed beer in his village as well as the neighboring villages. The community members may end up calling him *Xidakwa* (the drunkard). Because of his drinking problem, the name bearer may end up seeking professional help.

Fayeteri

The name may be given to a person with destructive behavior because the name bearer is always very angry, and he does not mind transferring his anger on his hard-earned property. The nickname *Fayeteri* may also be given to a person who believes in using force when solving family disputes. This indicates that the name bearer does not have time to enter into negotiations but uses physical force to instill discipline.

Mungoma-a-nga-twi

The name *Mungoma-a-nga-twi* was given to the traditional healer who refused to join a demarcated village set up by Chief Xikundu and his elders. According to informants, *Mungoma-a-nga-twi* refused to relocate because he did not want to leave his ancestors behind. He be-

lieved that if he relocated to the new village his ancestors would have deserted him. The name *Mungoma-a-nga-twi* literally means “the traditional healer who does not listen”.

N’wagagavula

This name may be given to a person who exerts high compensation for little damage done to him or her (Cuenod 1985). It may also be given to a person who cuts off more than his/her share, for example, meat or bread, or to a businessperson who sells his/her goods to people at exorbitant prices. The name *N’wagagavula* means “the one who cuts off more than his/her share”.

Pambulanyama

The nickname *Pambulanyama* may be given to a ravenous man who eats meat in large quantities. The name bearer attends every occasion with the intention to enjoy the meat served there. In some instances, the name bearer always avails himself at every party in order to take part in the slaughtering of cattle. His great capacity for eating meat makes him turn up despite having received no official invitation.

Madyelakhwirini

The nickname *Madyelakhwirini* may be given to a man who immediately spends all his earnings with friends and sends nothing home. The name bearer is indeed a spendthrift while this nickname literally means “hand-to-mouth”.

Xigalana

Xigalana refers to a bed bug, which sucks the cattle’s blood. It is a derogatory name given to a person with a dubious character. The name bearer appears to be smart but in reality she/he is the one who incites people to quarrels. The name can also be given to a person who does not want to work. He always depends on others for survival. They end up calling him *Xigalana* because he does not want to fend for himself.

Mapengani

The name *Mapengani* may be given to a person who deviates from the norm (Cuenod

1985). It indicates that the name bearer easily gets out of control and literally refers to “someone who is insane”.

Muchaviseki

Muchaviseki is a colourful nickname, which may be given to a person who is held in high esteem. The name bearer commands and enjoys respect within the community and is regarded as a role model in all respects. The community looks up to him for help and advice. The name *Muchaviseki* may thus be given to community leaders who bring change and development to people’s lives.

Xihlekisi

A person who cracks jokes may be nicknamed *Xihlekisi*, which reveals that the name bearer is held in high esteem in social circles as “the one who flows with laughter”. *Xihlekisi* is a colorful nickname with a definite connotation of endearment. The name bearer may adopt the nickname as his “first name”. It is also readily acceptable to his immediate family, relatives and the community at large.

Xigidavusiku

A person who travels in the still of the night is referred to as *Xigidavusiku* because such a person does not travel during daylight. When he wants to visit his relatives and friends who are staying far away, he waits for the night to come in order to start his journey.

Mitongakan’we

This nickname was given to a person who used to dress smartly and wear very expensive clothes. He always boasted that a person’s life was very short and one had to enjoy life to the fullest. In his daily contact with people, he used to emphasize that “*wanuna u fanele a tonga kan’we*” (a man should brag once).

Names Relating to Very Strong Sentimental Attachments

Pyata

The nickname *Pyata*, which means nakedness, may be given to a child of needy, destitute

parents. This means that the family can hardly clothe their newly born child since it is financially and materially in need. The nickname has to do with the hardships that the family was experiencing at the time of the birth of their child.

Makalakhiya

This is the nickname given to a girl of loose morals, as she does not hearken to the advice given to her by the elders and uses to sleep around. She is thus often caught in uncompromising situations with different men. The name *Makalakhiya* is therefore used for a person who has no keys to gain access to her house.

Mambvembee

The name *Mambvembee* may be given to a person who wears ragged or tattered clothing. This nickname may also be given to a dirty, shabbily clothed person. The name bearer may be a person who is poverty-stricken and does not have a decent job. He and his family depend entirely on secondhand clothing and handouts from community members. The name bearer is always in a deplorable condition.

The name bearer would comment that if God could give him a decent job his family would learn to wear new clothes. He is not even ashamed to call himself *Mambvembee*.

Magumeni

This nickname literally refers to rags or tatters. A person who dresses in rags and tatters is thus referred to as *Magumeni*. The nickname may also be given to a child in a poverty-stricken family whose clothes are in tatters.

Nicknames in the Work Environment

Humour is one of the aspects that makes life interesting as it serves as a source of entertainment, removal of stress and tension, and a social corrective in the work environment (Turner 2000: 453). The nicknames in the work environment transform personal expression into collective expression as they foster a sense of belonging, group dimension and identification. These nicknames often create colourful caricatures, which refer to the physical, behavioural and characteristic oddities. However, in the workplace,

nicknames may also be used to express appreciation for a person's behaviour or character.

Makumaswivupfile

The name *Makumaswivupfile* may be given, for example, to a person who has been recently employed to a high position in a company who found the company in a good financial standing and boasting a high rate of production. This means that he is not going to sweat because he got everything done and in order.

Jekiseni

This is a name given to a medical doctor (Macebele 2000). The name bearer had the tendency to use an injection when treating his patients. He attracted many patients to his surgery because his method of treatment that primarily centered on the administering of the injection proved to be yielding positive results. This kind of treatment earned him the name *Jekiseni* (injection). Due to his successful treatment of many different diseases through the administering of an injection, no patient felt comfortable if he/she could visit and leave his consulting rooms without being injected.

Xithicarana

The name *Xithicarana* is the diminutive of *thicara* (teacher) (Macebele 2000) and may serve as both colourful and sarcastic. One may have been very impressed by the service the teacher is rendering to the community and therefore affectionately call him *Xithicarana*. This name *Xithicarana* may also be given to a teacher in relation to his small physical appearance. Nevertheless, the name *Xithicarana* may also be given to a teacher occupying a junior position in a particular school. In this context, the name bearer does not stamp any authority and such a person is often undermined by his coworkers and learners.

Functions of Nicknames

Nicknames are very significant to both name givers and name referents. Kennedy and Zamuner (2006: 391) argue that the social function of the nickname depends greatly on the society that uses it. Nicknames may either indicate so-

cial hierarchy or connote group identity. Furthermore, they may connote identity and reputation of the nicknamed or referent.

The researcher further distinguishes between imposed and colourful nicknames. According to Chauke (2005: 152), imposed nicknames may be pleasant or not in that they are sometimes insulting, offensive or derogatory. He defines colourful nicknames are given to popular figures who enjoy a large following or support of the community. Turner (2001: 457) quotes Impey and Nussbaum (1996) when they say, "African culture has relatively conservative norms regarding direct expression of feelings and emotions, and a high degree of interpersonal sensitivity. There are many prohibitions regarding direct confrontation with another person. The arts provide a socially sanctioned vehicle for expressing complaints or criticism of others". This view is reinforced by Suzan (1994: 269) when she points out that name giving provides an outlet for the regulation of social relations in the tense social interaction of small communities. It allows people to communicate their feelings indirectly, without overt confrontation and possible conflict.

Nicknames containing cryptic social messages serve to express dissatisfaction or vent frustration. They are also used to cast suspicion or level accusation in the community, ridicule, mock or warn against an unacceptable mode of behavior (Turner 2001: 456). Finnegan (1970: 470) cites that names have many different interpretations in Africa from the psychological functions in that they provide assurance or work out tension, minimize friction, or express the self-image of the nicknamed or provide a means of indirect comment when a direct one is not feasible.

Turner (2001: 451) reinforces the view expressed by Finnegan (1970) when she points out that the practice of composing derisive names often embedded with humor can provide the individual with an acceptable but allusive way of astutely airing a conflict or source of discontent.

In Xitsonga culture, nicknames are often so entrenched that they become acceptable forms of address. They are frequently used to warn against an unacceptable mode of behavior or dispute any allegation leveled against an individual member of the family or community, for example, *Vuloyi* (witchcraft) or *Vudlakuta* (prostitution). Nicknames make social interaction in

human relationships easier, enjoyable and funny. They are also used to send messages that would in normal discourse be regarded as unacceptable, derogatory and insulting. In addition, the use of nicknames enables people to cope with despair, failure and allegation. However, nicknames may also be used to suggest positive feelings of endearment or social solidarity.

CONCLUSION

In this study it is noted that nicknames are one of the forms of address, which Vatsonga as a nation use to either praise or show disapproval of a person's behavior. Contrary to the common belief that nicknames are consistently names, which serve to signal endearment, affection and social approval, it is pointed out that nicknames are used with negative intent. Nevertheless, the paper has shown that there are a fairly high proportion of nicknames, which are user friendly and thus suggest basic warmth and affection. The study also reveals that both family members and peer group members use nicknames. The researcher also notes that nicknames serve an identification and classificatory function, especially in the work environment where by workers and employers are often no longer called by their first names. Nicknames are sometimes given in direct reference to actual body features or deformities as it has been noted. Nicknames were also given to people in relation to their behaviour and often signal sentimental attachments. They can, however, serve to express dissatisfaction or vent frustration, to ridicule, mock or warn against an unacceptable mode of behavior. Lastly, in this study, the researchers conclude that nicknames include imposed and colorful nicknames as well. Imposed nicknames are unpleasant, insulting, offensive, and derogatory in nature whereas colourful nicknames are said to be remarkable and are given to popular public figures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the name givers should make use of onomastic creativity to promote the Xitsonga tradition, culture and custom. This will make sure that the nicknamed will know and be proud that their nicknames reflect how others (name givers) see them.

NOTE

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