

## The Sociolinguistics of Kenyang Names: Phase One

**Dr Enoachuo Emilisco Jones**

Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, University of Buea, Cameroon, E.J. Enoachuo

### Corresponding Author\*

Dr Enoachuo Emilisco Jones

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**Abstract:** Kenyang is a language spoken in the Manyu Division in the South-West Region of the Republic of Cameroon in Central Africa. It has an increasing population of over 65.000 speakers spread out across three sub-divisions in two divisions of the South-West Region; Manyu division, in Upper and Central parts; and Koupe Muanegouba, at the west part of Nguti sub-division. The language is developing and has a written code (Latin script) but dominated by English graphemes for popular readability. Neighbouring languages result to three dialects; Upper Kenyang (“Kenyang mfay” or Haut Kenyang); Lower Kenyang (“Kenyang Nten” or Bas-Kenyang), Lower Kenyang is the reference dialect. Its developing status is endangered by the presence of the strong and influential spread of the dominant world language (English). The concern of this paper is on reconsidering the appellation of Kenyang proper names in view to revitalize their connotations in the language. Considering the fact that naming in

Kenyang is a socio-cultural-bound phenomenon, these proper names have not only lost their morphophonetic representation, but have lost its semantic properties. The proper or personal names considered are randomly selected names of persons, and places in the central, lower and upper Banyang in Manyu Division. What, and how are these names pronounced, written, and what do they signify given these are not arbitrarily assigned names? Interviews of 10 elderly people and 6 young adults native speakers in three villages of Upper, Central, and Lower Banyang and in three towns of Southwest; Mamfe, Kumba, and Buea were conducted. An ethnographic method through participant observation and vox pops provided the data that is explained using the Quan-qualitative approaches. The result shows that Kenyang proper names have been devalorised. Thus revitalisation is imperative since the language is undergoing linguistic development.

**Keywords:** *personal names, connotation, revitalization, anglicization.*

### Introduction

Cameroon is a multilingual country with over 255 languages Eberhard, David, Simons, and Fenning; 2021<sup>[1]</sup>. It is also a multicultural country among which is Kenyang. Kenyang is a language spoken in the South-West Region of the Republic of Cameroon in Central Africa. It covers the central part, expanding to the southwest of Manyu Division, with an increasing population of over 65.000 speakers spread out across three sub-divisions in two divisions of the South-West Region: Manyu division, in Upper and

Central parts; and Koupe Muanevouba, at the west part of Nguti sub-division. Neighbouring languages' influence on Kenyang left it with three dialects; Upper Kenyang ("Kenyang mfay" or Haut Kenyang); Lower Kenyang ("Kenyang Nten" or Bas-Kenyang), and Kitwi; Balung spoken in Meme Division Ojongkpot; 2015<sup>[2]</sup>. This is one of the third largest family groups in Cameroon; Mamfe language family is under the Southern Bantu phylum, Cameroon National Census 2012<sup>[3]</sup>.

Notably enough, this indigenous language is endangered by the strong and influential spread of dominant exoglossic languages, French and English which are the official languages of Cameroon, giving them a wide domain in the face of the weak national language. To this effect, Kenyang speakers tend to be acculturated in English, the official language closer to it. The concern of this paper is on reconsidering the appellation of proper names in Kenyang to revitalize the language, considering that naming in Kenyang is a socio-cultural phenomenon. The proper or personal names to be looked into are; names of persons, places. What, and how are these names pronounced, written and what do they signify given these are not arbitrarily assigned?

Sociolinguistics, simply put is the study of language as it is used in society or "the study of language in social contexts". Man relates or interacts with another using (most often spoken) language. This code signifies something in that community and that significance in some languages conveys or indicates an event, message or relationship. Here, the proper names among the Banyang people of Manyu in the South West Region of Cameroon has as focus the connotation and appellation of these names, and what they convey as the socio-cultural values and beliefs of the people. These values have been devalored if not extinct due to the presence of the powerful official languages of Cameroon (English and French). These proper names have been *anglicized* and thus have lost the cultural message behind them. There is therefore an imperative need for the revitalization of the appellation of Kenyang anglicized names in order to bring out the connotations that reveal the Banyang values. There is reconsideration to denote the message behind Kenyang names that they are not just arbitrary labels but have socio-cultural tags. To study a language implies the study of names in the language as a central aspect. Therefore, studying the origin of names in a language is of paramount importance. Though it is still at a formative stage in some areas Hough, C. 2016<sup>[4]</sup>, there is a need to foster it everywhere, Kenyang inclusive.

The Banyang or Manyang (for a single speaker) otherwise known as Banyangi, speak Kenyang. It is one of the three languages in the Mamfe language phylum, a language family among the sixteen spoken in Manyu Division in the South-West Region of Cameroon, out of the 288 national languages <sup>[3]</sup>. This language phylum is among the Bantu languages, that gives it the number (plural) marker morpheme [ba-] or /βa-/.

Kenyang covers the central part, expanding to the Southwest of Manyu Division, with an increasing population of over 65.000 speakers, spreading out across three sub-divisions in two divisions of the South-West Region: Manyu Division; Upper Banyang that speaks Kenyang Mfay (kènʔɔŋ mfãy) dialect; and Lower parts that speaks Kenyang Nten (kènʔɔŋ ntèn) dialect; and Koupe Muanevouba, at the west part of Nguti sub-division that speaks Kitwii dialect SIL, 1992<sup>[5]</sup>. Kenyang is boarded by Bitieku, Kendem (languages spoken in Manyu), and Mogamo (a language spoken in the Northwest Region of Cameroon) at the northern part, Mundani (a language in the Lebialem Subdivision in the Southwest

Region of Cameroon) at the eastern part; Boki, Denya (languages spoken in Manyu division) at the northwestern part; Ejaghem (a language in Eyumojock subdivision of Manyu) at the southwestern part; Bassosi (language spoken in Koupe Mwanegouba division in Southwest Region) at the northeastern borders; Bafaw (a language in the Meme division of Southwest Region) at the southern borders. These boundaries are according to the Cameroon administrative boundaries of the 1980s.

These bordering languages result to the fluidity of the two Kenyang dialects, leaving it with a postulated dialect known as 'Central Kenyang' (*kènǎŋ nènǎté*), a dialect that emerges from both upper and lower varieties Enoachuo, 2002<sup>[5]</sup>. Though the language is realized in these three (posited four) dialects the standard variety among these dialects is Lower Kenyang (*kènǎŋ ntèn*) with a written code, the Latin (Aramaic) script as its orthography. This standard variety is dominantly spoken in the divisional headquarter Mamfe and its environs (that is, Mamfe Subdivision) and some parts of the Upper Banyang Subdivision. The endangerment of the language is due to a strong and influential spread of dominant exoglossic languages (English, and to a lesser extent French), and Cameroon Pidgin English (language of wider communication) beside the neighbouring indigenous languages mentioned above. Though these names have their origin from Kenyang, there is the presence of colonial language in their orthography or articulation.

The onomastic of the people is a reflection of the events that bring the people together to expose their beliefs and values. These beliefs and values are reflected in their lifestyles and how this is plumbed down to the next generations. These beliefs that express their thoughts and communicate the meaning of specific knowledge about them for some 5 decades lack intergenerational continuity. There is therefore a threat for endangerment of Kenyang proper names, (an important aspect of language). Endangerment in the sense that the connotations of Kenyang proper names no longer have direct bearing with the meaning(s) or significance that surround and portray them. They are no longer reflexive or significant but mere arbitrary labels.

This work is on the backdrop of the endangerment of an aspect of Kenyang. As stated above the connotation of Kenyang proper names understudy is aimed at the revitalisation of meanings, significance and the epithet of these names. Among aspects that keep a language vital and valuable against their contact with other more powerful languages is the aspect of names. Kenyang though under class 5 (developing language) in language classification, faces endangerment in this area. There is assimilation or '*disemantisation*<sup>1</sup>' of Kenyang proper names in their morpho-semantics concerns. That is, proper names are no longer reflecting the socio-cultural significance neither is the appellation reflexive enough nor are the appellation epithetic. The work is pinned down on connotation and denotation of Kenyang proper names, an aspect that brings together the Banyang people. To reconsider the appellation and connotation of Kenyang proper names denoting their relationship to the Banyang values and beliefs, there is need to revitalise the language. Considering that naming in Kenyang is a sociocultural-bound phenomenon, Kenyang proper names have some implications and purposeful significances attached to them.

We, therefore, aim at investigating the axiom that naming is a process of labeling persons, places or concepts that identify values and virtues that represent the beliefs of a speech community. Is it reflexive

today in Kenyang proper names or are they disemantised and insignificant? How can these values and beliefs in proper names be revitalised among the Banyang people?

Naming is a real process of labeling persons or places. Thus, meanings or concepts identify the values and virtues that represent the beliefs of the speech community Al-Quran and Al-Azzam, 2014<sup>[6]</sup>. Naming in some modern cultures to a lesser extent is an arbitrary assignment of labels though most often they are signifiers of some events or referential of the culture and the media in that speech community. This is true in that some families desire to refer to an event, popular names in their culture, history, and other factors. Similarly, a name is a different element of human experience to an individual or a collective entity which it designates or denotes Agyekum, 2006<sup>[7]</sup>.

Also, a name is purely referential Rey, 1995<sup>[8]</sup>. From this backdrop, the Kenyang onomastics is put to question, whether these Kenyang names are purely referential to this present generation of Kenyang speakers or it is arbitrary.

Onomastic study on Kenyang is limited as stated earlier above to personal names and names of some places in the area of focus. African names in general and Kenyang in particular, denote and communicate a whole lot of knowledge about the person or place. This is lined to who or what the person or place (in this case) is identified with, or is known per the story around the bearer's birth or name-giver such as position in the family. The circumstances denote the birth of the bearer; parental/family situation; family hopes, desires, expectations and aspirations; financial situation; links with departed family members; and a way of keeping historical accounts Akpabio, 2003<sup>[9]</sup> and Fakuade, Fadahunsi, Fafiu & Adekeye, 2013<sup>[10]</sup>. The culture of most African people is manifested in their naming systems and practices <sup>[7]</sup>. To Agyekum, these words or names '... carry with them the power that transcends beyond mere identification and tagging of people...' In this, naming in the Banyang socio-cultural realm has a direct relationship with the respect attributed to that name or the circumstances surrounding the event.

The circumstances are in the present age nullified or overlooked to the point that these proper names are non-denoting as they are anglicized. In this, some popular personal names and names of some randomly selected places in the upper and lower Banyang zones are verified.

## Method

The data was collected from the primary source. Interest came for this topic since 2002 when collecting data to develop a scientific vocabulary for Kenyang. During this process, there were problems coming out with names in the original Kenyang appellation. The observation was made on many elderly Kenyang speakers who had no notion of names neither did they border to know their connotations nor their implications resulted to a Vox Pop and interview were conducted and recorded using a checklist of some Kenyang proper names commonly heard among Banyang people and some family members. This is basically to sample the people's understanding of the meanings or significance (at this stage, young adults and elderly native speakers who posited that the names have no meaning and significance). This investigation concentrates on a representation of these proper names (persons and places) to verify the assumption.

## Results

It is realized that 60% of the elderly people who served as the informant, knew Kenyang names were just in memory of the departed family members or of loved ones. These quota of the consultants attest that they name their children and places after their departed, loved ones and friends. They assume that a baby or a place is named to demonstrate love and respect for the person. Thus, an arbitrary naming of persons and places without any etymological attachment.

Those who endeavoured to bring the connotation behind these names (22%) are those who had once attended a seminar given on Kenyang by the Society of Kenyang Literature. These posit that some of the names had meanings that have phased out due to cross-cultural integration. A few (10%) are related to these seminar participants or related to researchers of African languages, also a-once-respondents to a finding on Kenyang research. This quota attests that Kenyang names are significant if the appellations could be nativised and its morphology considered. Meanwhile, 8% were respondents who knew that Kenyang names are arbitrarily assigned to persons or places without any implication. With this set, the names are simple codes given to persons and places without any consideration.

English adulteration of Kenyang left the Banyang people with a near-extinct socio-cultural value in naming. Proper names became unconscious to the point that one will be named 'Nyenty' (No Name) after another family member or friend whose naming exercise was controversial and ended such with no name. The question here is, does the baby named *Nyenty* today in a similar social situation to carry that identity? I would bluntly say 'No' because Kenyang names originally have socio-cultural implications attached to weird the power in the language that can convey a message when it is pronounced. This Kenyang name 'Nyenty' purported the existence of the conflict of interest in naming a child between 'name-seekers' and 'allegiance-debtors'. Thus, this controversial situation erupted among the parents or elderly family members' who declared the baby has no *name-sake*. The well-known Kenyang name 'Tanyi' has no connotation in the language. As such, it is alluded to signify 'father of twin babies'. The reality behind this name is that the morpho phonetics of the name left it meaningless. Its socio-cultural implication is /tè-ání/ (tání) that is 'anything he sees he must eat' demonstrating the fact that with the birth of twin babies he eats anywhere, anything and anytime as the opportunity presents him food (because he may not have enough at home for him).

Place's names remain focused on the history or circumstances surrounding the place of habitation by the first settlers, though the settlers today can't get the message out of it because of the strong presence of English that distorted the whole implication through anglicized pronunciation and orthography. A few examples of these anglicized Kenyang place names that are without meaning today are Bakebe, Mamfe, Egbekor. Call out these places, a Banyang person will say it has no meaning because of linguistic distortion of the language. From the findings, Bakebe is morpho phonetically violated to void it of its socio-cultural identity. We have here 'ba-' instead of 'βa' Bantu plural marker then 'kebe' (meaningless to a Kenyang speaker) in the place of /kéb/ or /kéβè/ which collocates with the plural marker to signify *travellers' bundles* or 'they took a rest because of night fall'. Mamfe by its appellation is meaningless, whereas, 'má-' (Kenyang transitive verb to introduce an imperative in the third person = 'let them') collocates with /fiyè/ (put/plant/place-in) to signify "let them put/plant...". Egbekor is as well



meaningless in Kenyang today. Sociocultural traits portray the movement of a family for settlement out of the original place (Mamfe) to a virgin land in the quest for land space. Thus, /ɛ̀βé-èkɔ/ (ɛ̀βéko) meaning a ‘new land or virgin forestland’.

Per the consultants’ account, the note is taken of variation of connotations of these names according to the dialect and socio-cultural alienations, and the tone assigned to the name. For example, ‘Enow’ (é̀nò meaning ‘that one/issue’ or é̀nò, for ‘hoe’, ‘it is cooking’ figuratively meaning a hot pot that cannot be touched (i.e. untouchable or interminable) in kɛ̀páŋ mfá. This socio-cultural aspect indicates that the baby came out after some issues faced by the family. Or because babies have been dying before birth (still-births) or after birth in that family but that particular baby is a boiling/hot pot so that it could not be terminated or is untouchable to the ravager. The connotation of *Enow* for ‘hoe’ on the other hand is prophetic that, this one has come to clean the mess or problems or pains that existed in the family before his or her birth.

### Discussion

The morpho-pragmatics influence of English in this language left out the socio-cultural values of naming in Kenyang thus making proper names meaningless and (if I may say) valueless. That is, it wiped out the pragmatics of Banyang naming culture. Let’s consider the following examples: **Bate** /bátè/ to mean friends; **Ashu** /ású/ or /ásô/ meaning ‘opener/header’ or ‘clean/clear/wash’ respectively; **Mamfe** /máfíyè/ to mean ‘let us lay/put/plant’; **Bakebe** /bákéb/ or /bákèbè/ to mean traveler’s *bundles/luggage/cleanser or took a rest* respectively, **Ndip** (meaningless) instead of /ndíyèb/, meaning ‘I passed on (the message) or ‘messed sent’, **Mbu** (meaningless) for ‘mbúyò’ (I have collected/picked/gathered: Upper Banyang).

The few examples above testify that these names have lost not just their appellations but also their connotation to meaningless today’s Kenyang proper names. A child learns better in the language s/he better understands UNESCO, 1968<sup>[11]</sup>. For Kenyang to justify why it was losing its grip as a language with the right to live and to grow is depicted by the axiom. At the data collection for Kenyang onomastic, there is a growing interest of most Banyang people to get to know these names and their socio-cultural implications, thus revitalisation grace coming unto the language as well as revalorisation opportunities. In addition to the few proper names mentioned above in an effort to revitalise Kenyang is the reformation of the following randomly selected few proper names.

## Kenyang names in English graphemes and their morphophonetic representation and meanings

Angliscize Kenyang Naming	Connotation	Kenyang Onomacy	Kenyang Implication
<b>Personal Names</b>			
Abbey	shouts or vexed	ǎ-βéh / áβèh	Fecundity / S/he has offspring
Angoh	S/he sees	áh-ṛòh / áʔò	Prophet (seer)
Arrey	meaningless	á-yé / á-yě	beauty / conqueror/escape
Ayamba	Meaningless	á-yá-mbé	Maiden/first or many
Ayuk	meaningless	á-ṛúk/á-yúk	Heard or beauty (cleanse)
Bate	meaningless	βá-tè/-tèh	Friends/patience, standstill
Bissong	meaningless	βè-sòh	Untouchable (hot)/bribe
Defang	Meaningless	ré-fáh/né-fáh	Thunder (unstoppable)
Etengeneng	meaningless	ètèhénèh	Hard sound object
Eyong	meaningless	é-yòh	Orator/voice/alive/noise
Nkongho	follower	h-kóh-ṛò	Pursuant
Tambe	Meaningless	tá-mbé	Worrier (mosquito)
<b>Place Names</b>			
Ashum	meaningless	á-sóh	Plant / Pined
Bachuo	meaningless	βa-ṫùṛò	They've come/gathered
Bakebe	meaningless	βá-kèb or -kéβè	Bundles or night fall/stop point
Egbekaw	meaningless	é-βé-ékò (éβéko)	Newland/virgin forest
Eyang	meaningless	é-yàh / èyà	Found/owner
Mamfe	meaningless	má-fihè	Let's build/settle
Manyu	meaningless	má-nú or βáñú	Portable/Estuary
Mbu	meaningless	m-búṛòp	Collection/gatherer
Messing	I write	βé-síh	Claybed / builder
Nfortabe	Chief + meaningless	n-fò-tá-βé	Chief procreator
Sumbe	meaningless	sú-mbèh	Abundant harvest
Tali	meaningless	ta-réʔ	good/handsome dad

*Sumbe* /sú-mbèh/ originates from *Kenyang mfáy*, it was founded from the activity of harvesting climbers like eru by pulling down the climbers because it is a forest area, each attempt to harvest brings down much because of difficulties of harvesting the climber (vegetables). Thus each time harvesting is to be done it should be much. *Ashum* instead of /ásóh/, a village whose origin is from hunters who planted crops or pinned sticks as a hut/hamlet to shelter their nights spent out of their villages (far off *Obang* clan) since hunters had to journeyed for some days. /ásóh/ 'he has planted (crops) for future supply or pinned sticks (a hut) as shelter for subsequent hunting exhibition far from home. *Besong*, instead of /βèsòh/ was assigned to a child born after a number of still births or delayed child bearing in a family. *Abbey* is assigned to a child born after the mother was considered barren. *Eyong* is named after a difficult delivery when the baby is tired and thought to be a still birth, then, at last, the baby's cry is heard, that is the voice of victory or life.

## Conclusion

Anglicization of these Kenyang proper nouns defiled the etymological implications and rendered them meaningless thereby loss of interest and significance of Kenyang onomastics among the Banyangs. From the original Kenyang, naming was significant according to the situation or event surrounding the person or place that a stranger or visitor who heard the name quickly understood the circumstances around the person or place, but modern Kenyang naming is arbitrarily done without any sociocultural potency. This is due to the fact that the Kenyang alphabets and sounds have not been appropriately disseminated in a way that the speakers could have ready access to the sociolinguistic wealth.

This investigation is a clear signal for the need to revitalise linguistic aspect of Kenyang. Should the national education policy (of 1992) on Cameroon national languages be effected, revalorisation and development of this language will bring Kenyang onomastics for the interest of all and the speakers and onomatologists in particular.

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