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Sentential and proverbial morphological structures of Christian theonyms in Bemba

Abstract

Drawing on Bemba, a Bantu language primarily spoken in northern Zambia, we interrogate the Christian theonyms to account for their complex morphological structures, while highlighting the wealth of information on the Bemba society and their sociocultural environment. For data, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis were employed. Thus, the article highlights two morphological structures, one being a sentential structure that consists of a subject and a predicate, and the other a proverbial structure that feeds into standard metaphoric and paradigmatic forms. Overall, the theonyms show the rich Bemba nominal and verbal morphology, as well as the socio-cultural narratives of the Bemba people.

Keywords: sentential structures, proverbial structures, Bemba, Christian theonyms, lexical morphology

1. Introduction

The paper draws on the affordances of lexical morphology to segment the names of God with the intent to identify and describe morphemes that constitute the Christian theonyms of the Bemba-speaking people of northern Zambia. Framed within the broader theoretical context of onomastics, the study focuses on the origin and forms of proper names, bearing in mind the agglutinative nature of Bantu languages (to which Bemba, the language under study, belongs). This is done to make a case for the varying morphological structures of theonyms and to appreciate the Bantu nominal and verbal morphology, as well as the wealth of information the names provide. The paper intends to show that Bemba Christian theonyms can have sentential structures in which some names have a subject and a predicate, what Felecan (2009) refers to as sentence names. Lastly, the paper argues that other Bemba theonyms have proverbial structures that feed into standard metaphoric and paradigmatic forms. As will become apparent, the understanding of the proverbial and sentential structure, on which morphological constructions of the Bemba Christian theonyms is built, allows the appreciation of the reality, for words in Bemba are built out of distinctly identifiable sub-parts (morphemes) that carry specific meanings and functions (Kambarami et al. 2021).

As its locus, the paper is motivated by the centrality of Christianity in Zambia, a country that has been declared a Christian nation (Kafunda 2022, Haynes 2021). Up until this declaration made in 1996, Zambia was highly religious, with Christianity topping the list as a result of the work of the early missionaries from different denominations. This will become apparent when we discuss Christianity and the Bemba Society. Of interest, however, is the influence of Christianity as seen from the outcome of lexical items which represent the names of God, the supreme being among the Bemba people. For ease of presentation, the paper is structured into the following sections: The next section provides a linguistic profile of Bemba, followed by the discussion of the place of Christian religion in the Bemba society. After this, lexical morphology, agglutination, and onomastics are attended to as conceptual matters on which the study is built. The methodology employed in the study is then presented, followed by a simultaneous presentation and discussion of the findings. Finally, a summary and conclusion are offered.

2. The Bemba language and its linguistic profile

Bemba is the widely spoken indigenous language in Zambia. It is predominantly spoken in five provinces: Central Copperbelt, Luapula, Muchinga, and Northern

provinces (Lumwanga 2015, Simungala et al. 2023). Alternative names for the language are IciBemba, ciBemba, chiBemba. The people who speak the language are called *abaBemba* or *Bembas* (Spitulnik & Kashoki 2001). Bemba has several dialects, many being varieties of Bemba spoken by other tribes which have historically fallen under Bemba influence (cf. Ngalande & Kumar 2022, Chilambe 2020). The principal dialects of Bemba include Aushi, Bemba, Bisa, Chishinga, Kunda, Lala, Lamba, Luunda, Ng'umbo, Swaka, Tabwa, and Unga. Each of these dialects is inherently associated with distinct phonology, morphology, syntactic and lexical differences (Whiteley 1951; Spitulnik & Kashoki 1996, Spitulnik 1998). The Bemba language has other varieties with several names which include, among others, *Copperbelt Bemba*, *Ichibemba cakuKopabelt* 'Bemba of the Copperbelt', *ChiKopabeeluti* or *ChiKopabelti* (lit. 'language of the Copperbelt'), *citundu cakukalale* 'the language of town' or *ChiTauni* (lit. 'language of the town') (Vidali & Kashoki 2014).

Bemba is the widely used language of communication, spoken by 33.5% of the population in the country (Simungala & Jimaima 2023). The Census of Population and Housing from 2010 indicated that Bemba was spoken by a higher proportion of the population in five provinces, namely: Central (31.8%), Copperbelt (83.9%), Luapula (71.3%), Muchinga (46.9%), and Northern (69.2%) provinces (Lumwanga 2015). As a result of the fact that Bemba has risen to prominence as a *lingua franca* (cf. Simungala et al. 2021), distinct varieties of the language have developed in towns and elsewhere (Spitulnik 1998, Simungala et al. 2021). The two most commonly referred to varieties are "urban Bemba" (or "town Bemba") and "rural Bemba" (or "deep or central Bemba"). According to Kashoki (1977), rural Bemba is also called Standard Bemba which has been adopted for official use in formal domains such as education and broadcasting. It is used in the Bemba royal household, courts, and schools, it is taught as a subject from grade four to twelve and is the medium of instruction from pre-school to grade three in the provinces of Copperbelt, Northern, Luapula, Muchinga, and on some parts of Central province (Spitulnik 1998, Kabinga 2010, Simungala et al. 2022).

Bemba is classified as M42 of the Bantu languages (Guthrie 1948). The language belongs to the Benue-Congo Family, a branch of Niger Kordofanian (Spitulnik & Kashoki 1996). Bemba, like any other Bantu language, "has a very elaborate noun class system which involves pluralization patterns, agreement marking, and patterns of pronominal reference" (Spitulnik & Kashoki 2001: 53). Noun classes, as prominent grammatical features of Bantu languages, show how each noun (or noun stem) is assigned to one of between fifteen and eighteen noun

classes. In this regard, the numbering of the classes is a means of labelling the different sets of concord prefixes that operate the grammatical agreement in all given Bantu languages (Guthrie 1970). Noun classes are often analyzed as a form of a nominal classification system and seen as belonging to the same domain as grammatical gender systems. Number in Bantu languages is mediated by the noun class system and the intricate interaction between noun class and number in Bantu has given rise to different theoretical analyses. Understanding the nominal class system is important if we are to appreciate the morphological structure of the Bemba Christian theonyms as they define the construction of all nouns in Bemba. In what follows, we discuss Christianity and the Bemba society to have a glimpse of the emergence of the Bemba Christian theonyms.

3. Christianity and the Bemba society

It has been argued that like any other African society, the Bembas subscribed to African traditional religion way before the coming of Christianity, which was introduced in 1893 by the first missionaries who came to Bemba land in northern Zambia (Mapoma 1969). Following the arrival of the missionaries in Zambia, the first Bemba translation of the New Testament Bible, produced by the Missionary Fathers, appeared in 1923 (Spitulnik 1998). Nevertheless, the official use of Bemba predates the translation. In 1991, it is reported that Bemba was used in government documents, educational textbooks, novels, and on radio and television programs. The Bemba pre-Christian era beliefs revolved around a two-tier system, “the belief in the co-existence of God and a host of lesser spirits” (Horton 1971: 88). These gods or spirits that existed in Bemba society had different names. As it will become apparent, these were some of the names Christianity would adopt as a new religion in Bemba land.

When the European Christian missionaries entered Africa towards the end of the 19th century, they introduced Christianity to Africans and converted some of the Bembas. Mapoma (1969) notes that the Roman Catholics entered Northern Province (the principle region where Bemba is spoken) of Zambia around 1893. About 1900 the Polymouth Brethren or Christian Mission in Many Lands (CMML), had entered Zambia via Barotse Province, worked their way into Luapula Valley to the Congo, settled at Mambilima, and later at Mansa. In 1910, the Anglicans arrived in Zambia, settled in Livingstone, and later set up a station in Luapula. In 1914, the station was moved from Mansa, the administrative station, to Chipili (Mapoma 1969). As highlighted already, the heavy presence of different Christian denominations would later mean that different names for the Bemba gods

and ancestral spirits would be transposed to the embraced Christian God. Consequently, some names were used in the translation of the Bemba Bible.

4. Lexical morphology and agglutination

In a brief linguistic profile of Bemba provided above, we noted that Bemba is a part of the Bantu language family. We wish to state further that Bantu languages are agglutinating languages. They have grammatical forms that are expressed by combining or adhesion of formative elements to the various roots. These formative elements are always recognizable as independent words detachable from the root, and capable of being affixed to other roots (Doke 1950). Thus, Bickford and Daly (1996) are on point when they refer to an agglutinative language as one in which words are made up of a linear sequence of distinct morphemes and each component of meaning is represented by its own morpheme. As we shall explain below, understanding Bemba as an agglutinative language is important as this knowledge contextualizes the study. This way, it will be understood that in the broader context of onomastics, care ought to be taken to segment and explain the meanings represented by each morpheme to fully appreciate a theonym. This will be made possible by lexical morphology as explained below.

As a theoretical toolkit, lexical morphology is a branch of morphology that deals with the lexicon consisting of lexical items which are the fundamental building blocks of morphological structures. The lexicon includes all words and any linguistic unit (morpheme) found in a particular language with their meanings and rules used in forming words or lexemes. Lexical morphology (LM) involves the formation of words or lexemes in a particular language through the attachment of words or linguistic units (morphemes) found in a lexicon of that particular language. It is the study of the lexemes and how they are created. LM is concerned particularly with neologisms (newly created words from existing words), the formation of words using derivation and compounding. Words are formed using phonological and morphological rules which are found in the lexicon where the rules are organised in blocks or strata, one below the other (Katamba 1993, Nkhata & Jimaima 2020). Central to lexical morphology is the principle stating that the morphological component of a grammar is organized in a series of hierarchical strata (Pesetsky 1979; Kiparsky 1982). Using lexical morphology, "words are formed by joining morphemes in the lexicon, where affixes must obey their sub-categorization frames" (Jeseen 1985: 75). Additionally, LM informs us that derivation is a pre-syntactic operation, while inflection is largely

a post-syntactic operation. This dichotomy is important as it highlights the productivity of derivation to create words outside of the syntactic frames on the one hand, and demonstrates how inflection processes intersect with syntax on the other hand, within the overarching morphological model of LM.

Lexical morphology was initially proposed by Pesetsky (1979) and later elaborated on by Kiparsky (1982). This paper adopted lexical morphology to analyse the morphology of the Bemba Christian theonyms. There are “two basic approaches to morphological analysis: the analytical and synthetic” (Agbeyangi 2016: 8). The present study adopted the analytical approach which involved breaking down of words into morphemes. Lexical morphology was used to segment and identify the morphemes that constitute Bemba theonyms, which are formed through derivation and compounding, thereby identifying their morphological structure. An important feature of lexical morphology is that “it is the word, rather than the morpheme, that is regarded as the key unit of morphological analysis” (Katamba 1993: 89). The study, therefore, analysed Bemba theonyms as names presented as words, as it can be observed from Houis (1983: 8) when he stated that “[...] names are practically not distinct from other linguistic signs (words) at the level of form and morphology[...]”.

6. Materials and methods

The study drew on two sources of data. Firstly, secondary data was collected through document analysis of three translated versions of the Bemba Bible, namely: *Baibele wa Mushilo* (Mushindo 1956), *Amashiwi ya kwa Iesa Bible* (Mbala 2009), and *Ishiwi lyakwa Iesa* (2015), as well as the selected Christian gospel songs. In particular, the document analysis was used to see and capture the names of god in Bemba. Secondly, primary data was collected from a sample size of 40 participants using one-on-one semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Respondents were drawn from the Mungwi and Kasama districts of Northern province, in chief Chitimukulu and Mwamba areas, respectively. These two districts are among the areas where the early Christian Missionaries first settled and are places where Standard Bemba is spoken. Interviews and focus group discussions were recorded using a smartphone. This was later translated, transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically. Given the form and internal structure of our illustrations, all examples will be glossed according to the *Leipzig glossing rules* (Kalkhoff 2022) which state that if morphologically bound elements constitute distinct prosodic or phonological words, a hyphen and a single space may be used together in the object language.

7. Findings and discussion

7.1. Sentential structures

As will be shown in this section, the structure of a name may vary due to the content the name-giver intends to achieve. Thus, among the data gathered some theonyms were found to have sentence structures, as seen below.

(1) *Ka-fula-wa-fita*

12cl-forged-1cl.GL-8cl-warrior

'Forger of warriors'

Kafulawafita 'forger of warriors' is made up of a deverbal *kafula* 'forger' (formed by prefixing noun prefix *ka-* from class 12 to a verb *fula* 'forge') and a noun (root) *fita* 'warriors' with a genitive linker *wa (u-a)* 'of' (GL) for class 1. The *ka-*, a noun prefix from class 12cl, is used in the formation of agentive theonyms. *Ka-* is added to a particular verb (in this case *fula* 'forge') to form an agentive noun, as observed by Katamba (1993: 68) that the *ka-* refers to "someone who does whatever is designated by the verb". In other instances, Kabaso (2016) observed that *ka-* is also added to a verb to form a nominal or proper name in praise of the bearer or the named.

Thus, *kafulawafita* comes from experiences of skilled blacksmiths who made weapons. The trainer of the would be armies of the Bemba society is also likened to a blacksmith who forges weapons. In the same way, the Bemba society believes that God has created people and equipped them with different gifts to use to fight and overcome Satan and his tricks. God has numerous armies (people and angels) who can fight for his people against their enemies when need raises. From the meanings of morphemes, it is instructive to see how a blacksmith is brought into the spotlight. The forging of elements (by blacksmiths) as daily activities of the Bemba is drawn upon as onomastic material to bring out the social-cultural narratives of the Bemba people.

(2) *Ci-imb-a-mi-longa*

7cl-dig-fv-4cl-rivers

'Digger of rivers'

Chimbamilonga 'digger of rivers or streams' is formed by the combination of a deverbal *chimba* 'digger' (formed by prefixing a noun prefix *Ci-* from class 7 to a verb *imba*) and a plural noun *milonga* 'rivers, streams'. As noted on the linguistic

profile, Bemba is spoken in Muchinga, Northern, Luapula, and Copperbelt provinces, which consist of the country's largest water bodies. It is for this reason that this theonym draws on the natural phenomenon *milonga* 'rivers/streams/lakes' and praises God the supreme being as the *chimba* 'digger' of rivers.

(3) *Shi-mu-cita-fi-pap-wa*

7cl-1cl-to do-8cl-wonders

'Wonder worker'

Shimucitafipapwa 'wonder worker' comes from a combination of a deverbal *shimucita* 'worker or performer or doer' (formed by prefixing a noun prefix *mu-* from class 1 to a verb *cita* 'do' and later pre-prefix a nominal *mucita* with a noun prefix *shi-* from class 7 forming *shimucita*) and a deverbal *fipapwa* 'wonders or miracles' (formed by prefixing a noun prefix *fi-* from class 8 to a passive verb *papwa* to form *fipapwa*). In this sentential theonym, the Christian supreme being is praised and thus named as the doer of wonders.

(4) *Shi-mu-it-wa-pa-kakala*

7cl-1cl-called-(PASS)-16cl-trouble

'One called upon during the difficult situation'

This theonym *Shimwitwapakakala* is translated as 'one called upon during the difficult situation'. It is as a result of combination of a deverbal *shimwitwa* 'one called upon' and an adverbial *pakakala* 'a difficult situation'. This is formed by prefixing a noun prefix *mu-* from class 1 to a passive verb *itwa* 'called' forming semivocalised *mwi* of *u+I*, and later, a nominal preprefix *mwitwa* 'called' with a noun prefix *shi-* from class 7. *Shimwitwapakakala* is then formed with additions of an adverb *pa* 'where' and an adjective *kakala* 'difficult.' Thus, *shi-* is being used as a secondary noun prefix in the formation of a particular theonym to indicate the outstanding greatness of God. It is in class 7 as a noun prefix with a semantic value that expresses largeness in size, volume, or quantity and quality. Hendrkse & Poulos (1990: 199) had proposed that "noun class 7 can be prefixed for outstanding people or being, amelioratives, augmentatives, languages, derogatives [...]". Using class 7 (cl7) as a secondary noun prefix, Mohlala (2003: 25) posited that affixing of attributive noun class prefixes with an augmentative significance to stems "brings about the idea of bigness or greatness of which such bigness or greatness may be perceived in favourable manner, in the context of praise, encouragement or appreciation". Therefore, *shi-* is a prefix

which is used in the formation of Bemba Christian theonyms in praise, appreciation, and acknowledgement of God as One with outstanding greatness.

(5) *Mu-leng-a-ua-leng-a-fi-onse*

1cl-cause-fv-GL-fv-8cl-everything

'One who has caused everything into being'

Mulengawalengafyonse is translated as 'one who has caused all things into being'. It is formed by the combination of the deverbal *mulenga* 'one who has caused', a subject prefix *u-alenga* (semi-vocalization of *u+a* forming to make *walenga*) 'who has caused' and later attached with *fyonse* 'everything' (formed by prefixing a noun prefix *fi-* from class 8 to an adjective *-onse* that is *i+o* resulting into a semi-vocalised *fyonse*) using a genitive linker *wa* 'of' from class 1. This shows the reverence accorded to God the supreme being as the maker of everything.

7.2. Proverbial structures

In this section, we now turn to another structure we noted in the data gathered. This is the proverbial structure. Thus, following Pongweni (1983), we unearthed theonyms with a structure similar to proverbs as represented by the examples below:

(6) *Ma-nkangala-mu-n-shi-fukatil-wa*

6cl-colocynth-1cl(SP)-9cl-Neg-outstretched arms

'A gourd-like fruit with thorns which cannot be embraced'

Mankangala munshifukatilwa translated as 'a gourd-like fruit with thorns which cannot be embraced' is formed by the combination of a noun *mankangala* 'a gourd-like fruit with thorns' and a negative passive verb *mushifukatilwa* (formed by prefixing a noun prefix *mu-* from class 1 for subject prefix to a passive verb *fukatilwa* 'be embraced' which is prefixed with *nshi-* a negative form of the first person) 'one that cannot be embraced'. Again, as noted above, this proverbial structure requires attachment with sociocultural knowledge to understand this attribute to the Supreme being as dual articulating friendliness (symbolised by fruit) and the exact opposite, being dangerous (symbolised by thorns).

(7) *Ø- Tumbanambo-mu-tima-ka-ebel-e*

1acl-filled with wisdom-1cl-heart-12cl(SP)pass judgement by oneself-fv

'One who has wisdom is well off and needs no one to give him advice.'

Tumbanambo mutima kaebele means 'one who has wisdom, is well off and needs no one to give him advice'. This is formed by the combination of nouns *tumbanambo* 'one who has wisdom' and *mutima* 'heart' to a verb *kaebele* 'pass judgment on oneself or tell oneself'. This theonym puts the supreme being as all-knowing, needing no advice from anyone. This proverbial structure shows that while humans need counsel and advice from each, the supreme being is a *tumbanambo* 'one with wisdom'.

8. Summary and conclusion

The data presented above leads to two interrelated conclusions on the Bemba Christian theonyms. Firstly, it has been established that theonyms can be sentential, as they have both a subject and predicate. Owing to the agglutinative nature of the Bemba language, each morpheme is distinct, having a meaning of its own such that the name is essentially a sentence. From the examples provided, notice that we have:

1. Pref + stem + Prep + stem
2. Pref + stem (Tense [present]) + fv + Pref + stem
3. Pref + Pref + stem (Tense (present)) + pref + stem + PASS
4. Pref + Pref + stem + PASS + Pref (locative) + stem
5. Pref + Tense (present) + fv + GL + Tense (present) + fv + Pref + stem.

Each of these segmented parts contributes to the overall meaning of the theonyms as they form a sentence together. It is no wonder Kabaso (2016) observes that names that follow the agglutinative nature of Bantu languages translate into English as a clause or sentence. Thus, the theonyms are said to be sentential as they have a subject and a predicate as seen from the examples provided. This is similar to Fortune's (1988) arguments that some Shona names are sentential, meaning they can be deverbative, nominal, or a combination of both nominals and deverbatives. Commenting on names in general, Kapwepwe (2002: 8) posited that "in Bemba tradition, some names are normally part of a longer phrase that gives completion to the name [...] or the phrase, simply alludes to or explains the meaning of the name, for instance *Chilufyawalufyamanganayakwe* (*Chilufya-wa-lufya-manga-na-yakwe*) 'Chilufya who has lost the charms or fetishes, has also his charms'.

Secondly, building on sentential structures of the Bemba Christian theonyms, the study held that beyond sentences, some theonyms are build-out of proverbial

sentences whose interpretation goes beyond the mere words making up the sentence (theonym). Thus, the study has shown that theonyms in this category are derived from proverbs and are mainly praise names and acknowledgment of God's awesomeness, greatness, and power, the supreme being. Like any complex structured name, these proverbial structured theonyms have their nouns prefixed with particular noun classes and their verbs affixed with certain derivational morphemes and verb extensions depending on the derived name. By segmenting the theonyms the way we did, we felt that it was essential to analyse them into their minimal elements to identify units or morphemes that make up a particular theonym. The structures observed were as follows:

6. Pref + stem + SP + stem +Pref + stem;
7. Pref + stem + SP + Pref + Neg + Tense (perfect) + PASS;
8. Pref + stem +Pref + stem +Pref + Tense (perfect) + fv.

With these structures above, Azhar (2012) hastens to mention that structures of proverbs vary in form, some of the structures are in the form of phrases of which some are in clauses (simplex and complex) and this is precisely what has been shown by the examples. As opposed to sentential structures, the examples provided have shown that the proverbial structured theonyms have relatively long and complex morphological structures as they behave like sentences. It is no wonder Kapwepwe (2002: 9) submits that "some Bemba names are also part of or completed in full as a proverb, an admonition or a cautionary statement for instance: *Sula, sule mbwa, umuntu taba musula* 'disrespect a dog, a human being is never disrespected'". We wish to underscore further that proverbial structured Bemba Christian theonyms are often transferred or transposed from the praises and acknowledgments of the supernatural occurrences or creatures or objects or the experiences of the Bemba society to God in acknowledgment of his unique character and greatness.

With the proverbial structure which builds on sentential structure, we wish to emphasize that the segmented morphemes feed into the rich Bantu nominal and verbal morphology. We were able to see that the derivational morphemes *ci/shi-*, *mu-* and *ka-* are generally very productive in the Bemba Christian theonyms. It is important to underscore that there is variation in these prefixes as they do not follow a certain pattern. The examples presented showed that some theonyms have secondary prefix or pre-prefix, especially those prefixed with *shi-*. Theonyms derived from verbs contain derivational morphemes, even up to nine morphemes. Morphemic-based meanings are unearthed by exploring the

form and internal structure of theonyms. Thus, we are struck by the wealth of information embedded in the names as they tell us about Bemba society as sociocultural factors govern theonyms. We conclude by pointing to agglutination and the affordances of lexical morphology in providing the full meanings of the theonyms. Going by the examples presented and our two interrelated conclusions, we lean on Mphande's (2006) view that names are constructed depending on the semantic import that the name-giver wants to convey and that, in creating names, people take the forms with which they are familiar with. They then creatively play with them to formulate new structures that fulfil their needs more satisfyingly and meaningfully.

Abbreviations

cl	class marker
GL	genitive linker
fv	final vowel
Neg	negation
PASS	passive
Pref	prefix
Prep	preposition
SP	subject prefix

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