





# Cultural Significance of Toponyms in South Africa: A Comprehensive Morphosyntactic and Semantic Analysis



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## ABSTRACT

Toponyms are integral to daily lexicon, functioning as designators for cities, towns, nations, and tiny villages. This study, therefore, delved into a morphosyntactic and semantic analysis of toponyms in the Nkomazi region, South Africa. This study employed structural and functional methodologies to analyse naming patterns, positing that African names can be classified into two morphosyntactic groups as an indication of language. Subsequently, twenty-five geographical designations and seven significant respondents from the area were chosen. The 25 place names underwent morphosyntactic analysis concerning their etymology and meanings, while semi-structured interviews were employed to gather information on these aspects from seven respondents, utilising the framework of frame semantic theory established by Charles Fillmore, which elucidates the connection between word meanings and comprehension of real-world states and concepts. It posits that words trigger or evoke "frames" of knowledge and experience, which are cognitive constructs representing common circumstances or experiences. The findings indicate that place names in the Nkomazi region are derived from grammatical norms resulting from linguistic alterations. These names are constructed from nouns and their corresponding phrases through a process known as derivational morphology. Furthermore, the study identifies three primary methods of naming: prefixation, compounding, and borrowing. The results demonstrate that place names in the Nkomazi region are both clear and descriptive in their purpose. Consequently, locations are analysed based on numerous factors, including topographical features, historical events, climatic conditions, and prominent individuals.

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## INTRODUCTION

Toponyms represent an essential aspect of linguistic expression, serving as important identifiers for cities, towns, nations, and small villages. Their role extends beyond simple nomenclature; they are instrumental in enhancing our understanding of geographical and cultural contexts. According to Kaschular, the facts, morality, and qualities contained in local languages build a speech community.<sup>1</sup> People who speak

<sup>1</sup> R.H. Kaschular, *Language Identities and Intellectual Communication in South Africa and Beyond* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2021).

Indigenous languages are more likely to develop a deep relationship and sense of identity with their heritage, traditions, rituals, and customs, forming a strong connection with their cultural roots. Place names, also known as toponyms, express a location's identity and communicate the story of its legacy and history in a multilingual setting, exhibiting diversity.<sup>2</sup> According to Room and Webb, the meaning embedded in practically all African names stems from African customs, beliefs, and history.<sup>3</sup> As a result, toponyms have historically held the world.

Furthermore, names serve as a reference point in communication, making them an important linguistic category.<sup>4</sup> In addition to ethnic settlement patterns, Pongweni claims that place names represent key turning points in community immigration.<sup>5</sup> These variables have made place names an effective tool for studying how modern personalities originated.<sup>6</sup> The names of nations, provinces, towns, cities, and other places are politically sensitive and symbolic of many historical events and activities, as they confer national and international recognition.

Recently, there has been a growing interest in researching the linguistic forms of African names, particularly in southern African countries. Notable researchers in this field include Guma, Koopman, Brokers, and Erasmus.<sup>7</sup> Although names represent fundamental linguistic material, they have received little attention in both language theory and practice. Onomastics has notably contributed to our understanding of the structural complexity that many names reveal etymologically, yet their morphological structure remains underexplored.

This article, therefore, aims to provide a morphosyntactic and semantic analysis of toponyms in the Nkomazi region of Mpumalanga province. The meanings derived from this analysis will serve as a foundation for further research into the motivations behind the creation of such names. This research involves conducting interviews with elderly residents and community leaders to explore the origins of these names. The meanings derived from these discussions serve as a foundation for examining the cultural and contextual frameworks that influenced the selection of these names. Furthermore, this study adopts a morphosemantic approach to conduct a toponymic analysis of place names within the Nkomazi region. The following key questions underlie the study:

- What are the morphological and semantic characteristics of place names in the Nkomazi region?
- What were the underlying motivations that led to the naming of these places in Nkomazi?

These questions sought to understand the historical, social, and cultural factors that influenced the name-givers and shaped the identity of these locations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Grammar and vocabulary constitute the organised communication system referred to as language. Meaning is mostly conveyed by people through spoken and signed modalities, although it may also be documented in written form. The diversity of culture and history characterises human language, showing significant cross-cultural and chronological variations. The production and displacement characteristics of human language enable the formulation of an infinite array of sentences and the reference to concepts, events, and things that are not currently present in the discourse.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> G. White and L. Makalela, *Rethinking Language Use in Digital Africa* (London: Channel View Publications, 2021).13.

<sup>3</sup> A. Room, *African Place Names: Origin and Meaning of the Name for Natural Features, Towns, Cities, Provinces, and Countries* (London: Mefford, Inc., Publishers, 2024); V.N. Webb, *Language in South Africa: The Role of Language in National Transformation, Reconstruction and Development* (New York: Benjamins, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Phumzile Innocentia Simelane-Kalumba, "The Use of Proverbial Names among the Xhosa Society: Socio-Cultural Approach" (University of Western Cape, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> A.J.C. Pongweni, *What Is in a Name? A Study of Shona Nomenclature* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Koopman, "Some Notes on the Morphology of Zulu Clan Names," *South African Journal of African Languages* 10, no. 4 (1990): 333–37.

<sup>7</sup> Mthobeli Guma, "The Cultural Meaning of Names among Basotho of South Africa: A Historical and Linguistic Analysis," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 10, no. 3 (2001): 15; Koopman, "Some Notes on the Morphology of Zulu Clan Names"; E.H. Brokers, *Apartheid: A Documentary Study of Modern South Africa* (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2024); B.P.J. Erasmus, *A Route in South Africa: Explore South Africa Region by Region* (Cape Town: Sunbird, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> A. Cooper, *Dialogue in Places of Learning: Youth Amplified in South Africa* (London: Routledge, 2018).

Human language acquisition is contingent upon social contact. Individuals utilise language to convey their emotions and perceptions, one means of which is through their chosen names.<sup>9</sup> Guma highlights that names possess diverse meanings, ranging from their psychological role in alleviating tensions to their utility in articulating the owner's self-image or providing indirect commentary when direct communication is unfeasible, thereby effectively encapsulating the significance of names.<sup>10</sup>

In most African communities, names are regarded as more than mere identifiers for individuals, places, or objects; they are considered to hold significant meaning and hold a deeper significance. Guma employs the Basotho people of Southern Africa to substantiate this perspective.<sup>11</sup> Their names and naming conventions serve as a sociocultural reflection of historical occurrences and embody social norms, values, status roles, authority, personality, and individual traits. Historical occurrences underpin the cultural connotations and associations of place names. This scholar contends that names and the naming process within this civilisation served as a sociocultural elucidation of the concepts of individual, person, and self. The present study analysed how their meanings may be comprehended in this context.

### Function of Place Names

Each name serves a deictic, nonreferential purpose. Place names, on the other hand, serve as addresses due to their precise nonreferentiality, which refers to their designation of specific locations or locales. Place names typically refer to a geographical thing, either real or imagined, and can vary as the object's features change. Due to their precise purpose, place names are a vital linguistic instrument in the daily communication of every society.<sup>12</sup>

As human civilisations become more complex, authorities seek to govern names in specific ways and under certain circumstances, such as how they are written, which names are chosen, and to which places they are applied. The location name serves.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the address function, there are several other functions, such as cognitive, emotive, and ideological. This means that, since names include certain concepts that typically elicit specific emotions, they are an effective tool for influencing and managing human behaviour and interaction.

Furthermore, since names have the ability to immortalise the mortal, such as humans and animals, they are a popular and important method of conserving cultural heritage. believes that every geographical name preserves its original meaning, in whole or in part.<sup>14</sup> Geographical names serve as identifiers for individuals and other living and non-living things that are native to a certain place within a local community.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on two hypotheses and thoroughly investigates the origins, as well as the morphological and semantic aspects, of selected place names. One example of this is the section titled "Motivations for Naming." According to Fried and Kiki, Fillmore's semantic framework, along with Australian names and the development of toponymic typology, are interrelated.<sup>15</sup> The concept of frame semantics is primarily studied in the field of syntax and is based on the idea that words, particularly verbs and nouns, convey specific meanings or interests. For effective communication, users or speakers must understand the definitions and histories of the terms they use. In 2019, this concept was discussed by Lappin and Fox.

This means that one's background knowledge and experiences will impact how they understand a word or a phenomenon. Frame semantic research seeks to describe and explain the world through words and their meanings by determining the justification that a speech community may have established for the category that the word or name represents. After gathering the detailed histories of these place names from various sources, such as records and people, this theory is used to help analyse the chosen names by

<sup>9</sup> J. Du Toit and C. Marais, *Moving to the Platted: Life in Small Town South Africa* (New York: MLM Publishers, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Guma, "The Cultural Meaning of Names among Basotho of South Africa: A Historical and Linguistic Analysis."

<sup>11</sup> Guma, "The Cultural Meaning of Names among Basotho of South Africa: A Historical and Linguistic Analysis."

<sup>12</sup> Liora Bigon, "Introduction: Place Names in Africa: Colonial Urban Legacies, Entangled Histories," in *Place Names in Africa: Colonial Urban Legacies, Entangled Histories* (Springer, 2016), 1–25.

<sup>13</sup> P. Jordan, *Place Names Politics in Multilingual Areas* (London: Springer International Publishing, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Room, *African Place Names: Origin and Meaning of the Name for Natural Features, Towns, Cities, Provinces, and Countries*.

<sup>15</sup> M. Fried and N. Kiki, *Advances in Frame Semantics* (Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publication, 2013); C.J. Fillmore, *Frame Semantics. In the Linguistic Society of Korea* (Seoul: Hanshin, 1982).

breaking them down into morpheme units. Furthermore, the second hypothesis is responsible for improved classification, and the purpose of this (gathering background narratives) is to gain a deeper understanding of the names. To categorise these essential Frame Semantics analyses, Fried and Kiki developed a toponymic typology.<sup>16</sup> Maieborn and Heisinger explain that the authors of Fried and Kiki chose their work because of its generalisability and thoroughness.<sup>17</sup> They believed these qualities would make their model applicable on a global scale and allow it to be used to examine toponyms across various cultural and demographic groups. This theory is particularly pertinent to the present study, as its comprehensive framework enables a nuanced understanding of the underlying purposes associated with specific toponyms and geographic features that reflect and encapsulate various cultural and customary elements. By exploring the significance of these toponyms, the study uncovers how they convey the values, histories, and social identities of the communities they represent. This approach provides valuable insights into the intricate relationship between language, culture, and the environment.

## METHODOLOGY

The researchers conducted a comprehensive study involving a sample of fifteen distinct towns, townships, and rural areas situated in the Nkomazi region of Mpumalanga province. This region was specifically chosen for its diverse socio-economic characteristics and its significance to the research objectives. Each selected location was meticulously evaluated to ensure it would provide valuable insights relevant to the study's aims, thereby enhancing the depth and applicability of the findings. The primary objective of this research is to investigate the profound historical and cultural significance inherent in the names of these locations. By analysing the historical context and narratives that accompany these names, this study aims to illuminate how they reflect the rich heritage and diverse traditions of the communities within the Nkomazi region. The selected areas exemplify a unique cultural identity that warrants exploration, thus rendering this study crucial for understanding the relationship between place names and local history. This region, renowned for its lush landscapes and diverse communities, presents a rich tapestry of cultural heritage that shapes the identities of its residents.

The research sought to uncover the various narratives behind the names, investigating not only their origins but also the enduring traditions and stories they encapsulate within the local community. To accomplish this, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with a wide range of local residents, including long-time elders who have witnessed the region's changes over the decades and younger community members who offer fresh perspectives. Experts familiar with the region's history were also consulted, enriching the discussions with their specialised knowledge. These engaging conversations enabled participants to share meaningful anecdotes and personal connections to the places they cherish, creating a vivid illustration of their cultural significance.

In addition to the invaluable oral histories gathered through interviews, the research incorporated a meticulous review of existing documents, including historical records, detailed maps, and relevant academic literature. This documentation provided essential context, revealing historical events, demographic shifts, and geographical features that have influenced the naming of these towns and areas over time. By integrating this wealth of information, the study aims to create a comprehensive understanding of how history and culture intertwine within the fabric of the Nkomazi region. Through this multifaceted approach, the research aimed not only to highlight the rich history and cultural identity of each selected location but also to foster a deeper appreciation for the significance of place names and their connections to the community's heritage. The semantic analysis emphasises the meanings embedded within these names, while the morpho-syntactic analysis investigates the internal structures, specifically the morphemes that constitute the place names. Ultimately, it sought to celebrate the stories that define the Nkomazi region and resonate profoundly with its people.

The ethical certificate issued by the University of Venda provides formal confirmation that the study adheres to established guidelines throughout its duration. Prior to participation, all individuals were required to sign an informed consent form. This document thoroughly delineated the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and any potential risks. Participants were explicitly informed that their

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<sup>16</sup> Fried and Kiki, *Advances in Frame Semantics*.

<sup>17</sup> C. Maieborn and F. Heisinger, *Semantics Theories* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

involvement in the study was entirely voluntary, and they retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any adverse consequences. This approach was designed to promote transparency and to uphold the autonomy of all participants engaged in the research.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides a detailed analysis of the morphological and semantic structures of select place names in the Nkomazi area of Mpumalanga, South Africa. By examining the linguistic elements and meanings associated with these names, the study offers important insights into their cultural, historical, and geographical significance to the local community. This exploration highlights the intricate relationship between language and place, as well as the broader implications of naming practices within the Nkomazi region.

### Examination of place names using morphosyntactic analysis

Morphosyntax represents a crucial component of linguistics that is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the intricate structures and components of languages, including Siswati. This field involves the analysis of the lexicon, which includes the principles of word formation and the relationships among words within a language. The majority of methodologies in morphology concentrate on the construction of words from morphemes, the smallest units of meaning. Morphemes consist of roots that can stand alone as words, as well as affixes that only appear within larger lexical units. It is essential to recognise that Siswati is part of the Bantu language family. Bantu languages are agglutinative, utilising a combination of affixes, suffixes, roots, and stems to construct words and form their morphological structures. The phonological surface structures of nouns in Bantu languages often consist of either a stem alone or a combination of a prefix and stem, or an augment and stem. The morpho-syntactic examination of Nkomazi place names involved the structural morpho-syntactic processes underlying these names. Text analysis was employed to examine specific names from the Nkomazi region. The morphological structure of the names under examination was examined as follows.

This article presents an examination of the morpho-syntactic and semantic dimensions of selected place names. The semantic analysis emphasises the meanings embedded within these names, while the morpho-syntactic analysis investigates the internal structures, specifically the morphemes that constitute the place names.

### Place names with prefixes included

In the field of linguistics, a prefix is considered a performative element, as it alters the form of the word to which it is attached. Prefixes can be divided into two categories: inflectional and derivational. Inflectional prefixes generate a new form of a word while retaining its fundamental meaning and lexical category. Similar to other types of affixes, prefixes are typically classified as bound morphemes, indicating that they cannot function independently as standalone words.

**Table 1: Place names with prefixes**

S. No.	Prefix	Root	Place name
1.	e-	Ngugwana	Engugwane
2.	e-	Mbuzini	Embuzini
3.	e-	Mzinti	Emzinti
4.	e-	Sibange	Esibange
5.	e-	Mbangwane	Embangwane
6.	e-	Mbongozi	Embongozi
7.	e-	Mgobodzi	Emgobodzi
8.	e-	Magogeni	Emagogeni
9.	e-	Bhodlindlala	Ebhodlindlala
10.	e-	Bhevula	Ebhevula
11.	e-	Mangweni	Emangweni
12.	e-	Dludluma	Edludluma

13.	e-	Ngwenyeni	Engwenyeni
14.	ka-	Masimi	Kamasimini
15.	ka-	Mhlushwa	KaMhlushwa
16.	ka-	Lugedlane	kaLugedlane
17.	ka-	Matsamo	KaMatsamo
18.	Ka-	Mdladla	Kamdladla
19.	e-	Magudu	Emagudu
20.	e-	Goba	Egoba
21.	e-	Khulubuse	Ekhulubuse
22.	e-	Aniva	E-aniva

In Table 1, common nouns are transformed into place names through a linguistic process known as pre-prefixation. This process is particularly evident in the Nkomazi naming conventions, which consist of both root words and affixes. The affixes play a crucial role in denoting locality and include two primary prefixes: the locative prefix "e-" and the possessive prefix "ka-." The locative prefix "e-" indicates a specific geographical location, while the possessive prefix "ka-" often implies ownership or relation to a particular person or entity. Although these prefixes are consistently used across various place names, each specific location is identified by distinct root words that convey meaningful information about the area.

In addition, the combination of these locative and possessive prefixes with unique root nouns not only helps in establishing a clear identity for places but also reflects the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Nkomazi region.

### Place names that make use of compounds

Combining two or more words to create a new term is known as compounding. Compounding frequently results in a word or phrase that has a meaning distinct from the meanings of the words used as constituents.

**Table 2: Place names that make use of compounds**

S.	Prefix	Compound element	Root	Root	Compound place name
1.	e-	verb+noun	bhodla	ndlala	Bodlindlala
2.	e-	verb+noun	phosa	vili	Phosavili
3.	e-	noun+noun	nhlaba	Vili	Nhlabavili
4.	e-	verb+noun	Mhlamba	nyatsi	Emhlabanyatsi
5.	ka-	verb+adverb	ndvuma	yedvwa	Kandvumayedvwa
6.	e-	noun+adjective	Ntsaba	Mhlophe	Tsabamhlophe

Table 2 shows the circumstances described above, where two lexemes (or words with complete lexical meanings) are combined to create a single word. For instance, the noun "ndlala" means hunger, while the verb "bhodla" conveys the idea of rage. Thus, one can infer the meaning of the compound word by considering the meanings of its individual components. Moreover, the boundaries between these components are quite clear. The compound noun "bhodla indlala," which translates to "roar of hunger," is formed by merging these two nouns. To derive a place name from this compound term, a locative prefix is added. In this case, the locative prefix "e-" is attached to "bhodla indlala," resulting in "ebhodla indlala," which means "where there is the roar of hunger." The process of renaming compound terms follows the same method used to create place names by compounding and prefixing.

### Place Names derived from other languages

Languages possess an inherent fluidity and dynamism, continuously evolving and transforming over time. New words and expressions regularly emerge, while others gradually become obsolete as societies adapt and change. This evolution is particularly evident in the interactions between different languages. The influence of foreign languages is considerable and plays a significant role in shaping the development of various languages.

In recent years, the English language has increasingly dominated the linguistic landscape, largely due to the forces of globalisation, which have facilitated cultural exchange and communication on an unprecedented scale. As a result, English is becoming prevalent in various domains, including business, technology, and popular culture, often overshadowing other languages. The impact of this globalisation is particularly pronounced in indigenous languages of developing nations, which are frequently influenced by the language of their former colonisers. This linguistic blending can lead to a decrease in the use of indigenous languages, making them more vulnerable to extinction. A key concept in this discussion is that of loanwords. Loanwords, or terms borrowed from one language (the donor language) and partially integrated into another (the recipient or target language), serve as a clear example of this linguistic exchange. They not only enrich the vocabulary of the recipient language but also reflect the cultural interactions and historical relationships between different language speakers. Through loanwords, we can observe how languages adapt and incorporate new ideas, concepts, and nuances from one another.

**Table 3: Place names derived from other languages**

S.	Prefix	Source of language	Indigenised place name	Source of language
2.	e-	Naas	Enasi	Afrikaans
3.	e-	Schulzendal	Eshuzindali	Afrikaans
4.	e-	Schoemansdal	Eskumane	Afrikaans
5.	e-	Jeppes Reef	Etjepisi	Afrikaans
6.	e-	Boschfontein	Ebhoswantini	Afrikaans
7.	e-	Komatiport	Enkomatipoti	Afrikaans
8.	e-	Driekoppies	Edrikopisi	Afrikaans
9.	e-	Middleplaas	Emdliplazi	English+Afrikaans
10.	e-	Longeloop	Elang'lubhu	Afrikaans
11.	e-	Buffelspruit	Ebhevula	English
12.	e-	Tonga	Etonga	Afrikaans
13.	e-	Kaapmuiden	Ekapumende	Afrikaans

Table 3, presented above, illustrates the names of various borrowed locations, highlighting the linguistic and cultural exchanges that occur among diverse populations. Place names that are recognised in both Afrikaans and English typically undergo spelling modifications to align more closely with English phonetics. This transformation is a component of the indigenisation process, whereby borrowed names are adapted to conform to the structural conventions of the target language. Additionally, these names receive a Siswati nativisation by incorporating the locative prefix (e) at the beginning. The origins of these names can be traced back to either the English or Afrikaans languages.

### **Analysing Place Names Semantically**

This section analyses the semantics and etymologies of selected place names, providing an in-depth discussion of their meanings. Due to the intrinsic relationship between the semantics of names and their etymology, it is essential to examine both dimensions concurrently to achieve a comprehensive understanding. According to frame semantic theory, names possess inherent meaning independent of their contextual usage. Consequently, the semantic analysis of place names in the Nkomazi region necessitates employing multiple methodologies to accurately attribute meaning, in alignment with established semantic theory.

### **Place Names in Topography**

The findings of this study indicate that place names mainly originate from geographical features or physical characteristics of the land. This category is known as topographical names or toponyms. These names, which can serve as either surnames or given names, typically reflect the local landscape, incorporating elements such as hills, valleys, and rivers.

**Table 4: Place names in topography**

S.No	Place name	Topographical feature	Frame semantics (meaning)
1.	Engugwane	Stream	Place near the stream
2.	Emlumati	Perennial river	Place near the river
3.	Enkomazi	Perennial river	A place near the river that has clean water.
4.	Edriekopies	Maintains	Mountainous or hilly place
5.	Emgobondzi	River	A place next to the river called Nkomazi
6.	Embongozi	Stream	A place near the stream.
7.	Edamini	Dam	A place near a man-made dam.
8.	Kamasimini	Type of soil	In a place with fertile soil, people are practising subsistence farming
9.	Nyetane	Stream	A place near a stream that is a tributary of the Mlumati River.
10.	Engwenyeni	Stream	A place near a stream.
11.	Kamahholombane	Citrus	A place where they are growing citrus fruits

Table 4 illustrates the naming conventions for places within the Nkomazi region, emphasising their geographical characteristics. Place names are derived from the descriptive physical features of the area, including hills, rivers, mountains, soil types, flora, slopes, and tributaries. These topographical names not only enhance the visual appeal of the landscape but also effectively convey the distinct shapes of the associated features. Additionally, the names reflect the relationship between these features and the surrounding environment, provide insight into how the names were established in response to ecological influences, and highlight the connections between the landscape and notable historical events.

#### Place names associated with animals

Place names that reference animals often serve as indicators of the specific regions where these creatures live or thrive. For example, names like "Deer Creek" or "Eagle Nest" not only pinpoint geographical locations but also reveal important information about the local wildlife and their habitats. Additionally, these names can shed light on historical ecosystems, illustrating how certain species were once more prevalent in particular areas. By studying these place names, we can gain a deeper understanding of the natural world and the changes that have occurred over time in our environment.

**Table 5: Place names associated with animals**

S.	Place name	Type of animal	Frame semantic meaning
1.	Ngwenyeni	Crocodile	A place where there are crocodiles
2.	Ngugwana	Chicken	A place where chickens are found
3.	Bufelspuit	Buffalo	A place where buffalo are found
4.	Nkomati	Female cow	The place where cows are grazing
5.	Mbuzini	Goat	A place where there are goats
6.	Kasbhejane	Rhino	A place where rhinos are found
7.	Mgwenya	Crocodile	A place where crocodiles are found

In Table 5, Locations may be designated according to the animal, insect, or bird characteristic of the region, as illustrated in the examples provided in the preceding table. The word eNgwenyeni translates to "a place with crocodiles." This signifies proximity to a perennial river inhabited by a substantial population of crocodiles. The same applies to the site referred to as eNgugwane, which houses hens. Moreover, instead of naming a location by the traditional leader's name, sites are referred to by the totem animal that is believed to be intimately linked with the residing clan.

### Locations named after historical occurrences, activities, and weather

The distinctive way of life within a community can be effectively conveyed through the naming of locations that reflect significant events, activities, and climatic conditions. Qualitative interviews with participants revealed insights into the meanings attributed to these recognised locations, as exemplified in the following discussion.

**Table 6: Locations named after historical occurrences, activities and weather**

S.	Place name	Activity	Frame semantic meaning
1.	Emalelane	Business	It began as a train station; now it is a small town that contributes to the local economy.
2.	E-kapmaiden	Mining	It is a small mine that supports the local economy.
3.	E-Komatiport	Port of entry	Is there a port of entry between South Africa and Mozambique?
4.	Emananga	Port of entry	It serves as a point of entry between South Africa and Eswatini. It created several job opportunities for local people.
5.	Engogolo	Agriculture	It is a location where local people grow sugar cane and other crops.
6.	Kamahholombane	Agriculture	It is a place where citrus fruits are grown for commercial purposes.

In Table 6, Mnotfo, an elder from Nkomazi, explains that place names in the area come from important historical events related to settlement, business, leisure, and farming. For example, Kamahholombane is a cultivation. Both are renowned for their respective specialities. Furthermore, the location's name was influenced by its climate, as was the case with Emoyeni, according to Shinga. The name suggests that such incidents and historical occurrences should not be disregarded. In other words, what happened on occasion may still be happening in the past and will always be summed up in a place name. To understand such names, one must be familiar with the entire historical and/or social background that led to the choosing of a place name.

### Locations bearing the names of notable personalities

Eponyms can be used to describe a person or, less frequently, a location or object that is thought to be named after someone or something. People in positions of authority or landowners, particularly those with ties to a specific area, are referred to by honorific and commemorative names.

**Table 7: Locations bearing the names of notable personalities**

No.	Place name	Prominent person	Commemorable role
1.	Matsamo	Matsamo	Traditional leader
2.	Mbambiso	Mbambiso	Traditional leader
3.	Mdzili	Mdzili	Traditional leader
4.	Mhlushwa	Mhlushwa	Traditional leader
5.	Lugedlane	Lugedlane	Traditional leader
6.	Mawewe	Mawewe	Traditional leader
7.	Msholozzi	Msholozzi	A prominent political leader.

In Table 7, the place names listed above honour those who are deemed significant in the Nkomazi area and those who should be remembered. Nonetheless, one of the elders, Mr Vimba Ntimba, said, "Important people should be through naming places after them." He asserted that accomplishments such as holding leadership roles, such as headman, council of elders, political leader, community elder, religious leader, or traditional leader, could earn one notoriety or repute.

**Place names that correspond to the word classes developed by Karl Mainhof****Table 8: place names that correspond to the word classes**

S. No	Word class	Prefix	Name of the place
1.	Class 3	Um-	Umlumati
2.	Class 9	In-	Ingugwane
2.	Class 9	In-	Inkomazi
4.	Class 11	Lu-	Lugedlane
5.	Class 5	Ema-	Emalelane

**DISCUSSION**

This study offers a detailed examination of the morphosyntactic and semantic characteristics of the Nkomazi region, utilising Frame Semantics as a guiding framework. Within the Swati community, there is a profound understanding of the cultural significance, historical context, and emotional resonance associated with various geographical locations. The findings of this study are congruent with those of Blank and Sharpley, that the formation of place names in this context occurs through three primary morphological processes: prefixation, borrowing, and compounding.<sup>18</sup> Each of these processes is characterised by consistent and predictable inflexion patterns, with prefixation having the most substantial impact on the resultant toponyms.

Agglutination, a distinctive feature of Bantu morphology, facilitates an extensive analysis of toponyms by enabling the decomposition of each name into two interrelated components: one that denotes the place itself, and another that imparts additional referential meaning. This intricate interplay between morphology and semantics yields a rich tapestry of meanings that reflect the community's values, ancestral histories, and environmental attributes.<sup>19</sup> For example, specific toponyms may encapsulate local legends, notable landmarks, or significant events that have shaped the community's identity.

Bantu nouns frequently emerge from incomplete semantic classes, resulting in a diverse array of meanings and characteristics associated with specific prefix morphemes. According to Nkuna et al., all languages employ systematic morphological rules to enhance the interpretation of place names, thereby enriching both the linguistic framework and the cultural contexts in which these names are situated.<sup>20</sup> Place names often encapsulate historical, geographical, or social connotations, significantly contributing to the understanding of their significance within a given community.

Furthermore, Mphasha et al assert that the combination of morphemes during word formation adheres to universal morphological principles applicable across multiple languages.<sup>21</sup> These principles enable the manifestation of both unique linguistic features and shared attributes, thereby facilitating effective communication among speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The interplay between distinctive morphemes fosters the development of new words and concepts while conforming to the structural rules that govern language comprehensively. This dynamic underscores the intricate relationship between language formation and cultural identity, emphasising the depth of linguistic inquiry within Bantu languages and beyond.

Similar to how personal names convey significant social and linguistic implications, the selected place names within the Nkomazi region also embody deep meanings that resonate with the community's history and cultural heritage. The findings of this study highlight the significant role that the grammatical structure of the Siswati language plays in the formation and evolution of place names. These grammatical and contextual influences are critical in shaping how place names are created and understood within the community.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, these place names are not merely labels; they constitute essential elements of the Siswati lexicon, deeply embedded in the cultural narratives of the Swati people. Each place name carries

<sup>18</sup> Leslie Bank and Nelly Sharpley, *Covid and Custom in Rural South Africa: Culture, Healthcare and the State* (Hurst Publishers, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Bigon, "Introduction: Place Names in Africa: Colonial Urban Legacies, Entangled Histories."

<sup>20</sup> Khulisile Judith Nkuna et al., "Uncovering the Influence of Taboos in African Linguistic Tradition: An Ethnographic Study into Their Role in Society," *Forum for Linguistic Studies* 7, no. 11 (October 20, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i11.10139>.

<sup>21</sup> Lekau Eleazar Mphasha, Khulisile Judith Nkuna, and Masoga Billy Sebata, "The Impact of English Language as Medium of Instruction versus South African Indigenous Languages Offered as Modules on Academic Progress of First Year Higher Education Students: A Case Study of the University of Venda, Limpopo Province, South Africa," *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 1 (2022): 19251–65.

<sup>22</sup> Jordan, *Place Names Politics in Multilingual Areas*.

with its historical significance and social context, serving as a bridge to the community's collective memory and identity.

Additionally, these names facilitate language acquisition among new generations, acting as tangible links to the language's grammar and vocabulary, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of their heritage. The preservation of these place names is vital for maintaining the rich cultural identity that characterises the Swati people.<sup>23</sup>

This study highlights that examining place names goes far beyond simple labels; it encourages a thorough exploration of the intricate relationships among language, culture, and community identity. Through a careful analysis of the origins and meanings of these names, the research unveils a rich tapestry of stories and histories that each name embodies. This exploration reveals how place names encapsulate the values, traditions, and lived experiences of the communities they represent.

Each place name functions not merely as a geographic marker but as a gateway to the past, reflecting the unique characteristics, historical events, and cultural milestones that contribute to the identity of its inhabitants. For example, certain names may commemorate local victories or significant individuals, while others may reflect the influence of Indigenous languages or the remnants of historic settlements.<sup>24</sup> Viewed through this lens, place names are essential elements of a community's narrative, preserving collective memories that continue to shape and enrich the identities of those who live within these environments. This study provides critical insights into the heritage and continuity of cultural identities across generations.

This comprehensive understanding fosters community cohesion and individuality.<sup>25</sup> Place names extend beyond their function as simple geographical markers; they represent vibrant narratives that capture the historical and cultural essence of the communities they signify. This connection facilitates engagement with the heritage and identity of diverse populations across various timelines and locations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends that a comparative study should be conducted, which analyses the toponyms of Swati in different regions of Mpumalanga to identify semantic patterns and variations in morphosyntactic features. In the same vein, the relationship between prefixation and compounding in the sharing of unique naming conventions could be examined by a comparative study with other Bantu languages. Additionally, factors such as gender, education, and age could be examined to understand how they influence the use of places and naming, which could provide deeper insights into community practices in the Nkomazi region. Importantly, tracing the history of name changes in places can halt the already existing effects of migration, colonisation, and language contact. Thus, to support language preservation, the names of places in the Swati language could be documented in annotated repositories, which would promote cultural identity and support language policy development in South Africa.

This paper highlights the critical significance of understanding the complex interplay among language, culture, and community identity, particularly in the context of indigenous languages. Recognising this relationship is essential not only for the preservation of these languages but also for the protection of the cultural identities they represent. Indigenous languages serve as vital carriers of tradition, history, and collective memory, reflecting the unique worldviews and values of their respective communities. By promoting and revitalising these languages, we honour the heritage of indigenous peoples and contribute to the enhancement of cultural diversity within the global community. Consequently, initiatives aimed at documenting, teaching, and celebrating indigenous languages are vital to sustaining the identities and cultures associated with them. The selection of toponyms should be characterised by positivity and inspiration, serving to celebrate and commend cultural heritage. This practice ought to be regarded as an important means of honouring and recognising the values and customs inherent in diverse societies.

## CONCLUSION

This study offers an in-depth examination of the morphosyntactic and semantic characteristics of specific place names in the Nkomazi region. The selection of these toponyms was conducted randomly, with the

<sup>23</sup> Kaschular, *Language Identities and Intellectual Communication in South Africa and Beyond*.

<sup>24</sup> S. Lappin and C. Fox, *The Handbook of Contemporary Semantic Theory* (London: Wiley, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> White and Makalela, *Rethinking Language Use in Digital Africa*.

research employing a combination of interviews with local residents and thorough analyses of secondary source texts to gather data. The investigation focused on three main dimensions: morphological, syntactic, and semantic levels. Additionally, the study explored the role of place names in educational contexts, emphasising their importance in cultural and linguistic identity.

The paper has shown that place names in the Nkomazi region are shaped by three key morphological processes: prefixation, compounding, and borrowing. Each of these processes contributes to the unique structure and meaning of the names. For instance, prefixation may alter a root word to denote a particular location or feature, while compounding combines multiple elements to create a new semantic meaning. Borrowing reflects the influence of other languages and cultures in the region.

Moreover, the study found several motivating factors for the naming of various toponyms, including local topography, historical significance, and climatic conditions. The geographical features of the area often provided descriptive inspiration for names, while historical events or figures shaped the context and relevance of certain place names over time. Climate also played a role, as environmental conditions often influenced how locations were named and understood within the community.

This study highlights that place names are not merely labels but are rich linguistic indicators that can be analysed from morphological, syntactic, and semantic perspectives. They encapsulate the cultural heritage and environmental ethos of the Nkomazi region, serving as essential elements in the fabric of local identity.

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